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IN THIS WORLD
and Other Stories

IN THIS WORLD
and Other Stories

BY EUGENE ZILLER

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THE JOURNEY TO BRENTWOOD

IT IS HOT, the car and the day both. I sit stiffly, driving stiffly, glancing down from time to time at the temperature reading on the dashboard, my shirt wet against my back. It is a clear day. The sky is clear and the sun beats down upon the houses and trees, glaring on the road. She is in the back seat with the kids. I do not have to look in the rear view mirror to know she is sitting stiffly too, watching me, the road. It will be too hot I told her. This old junk box just won't make that kind of trip. But she wouldn't listen. She knows better. Women are like that, even those that drive. They believe it takes just a little sense and even less knowledge to make a car go. Any car. Just turn a key, step on the starter, and that's all there is to it. They can't even tell one car from another, name or year.

I say nothing, watching the needle on the gauge, feeling her stiff at my back. The kids are quiet now. Probably they are sleeping, have succumbed to the heat, the torpor of summer midday. A car passes us, going fast into the east, the impact of its speed sending back a blast of hot air against us. A new car. In no time it is no more than a single glint of light in the distance, then it is nothing. Headed out to the summer homes you read about or see in the movies. The North Shore. The South Shore. They talk about it that way. Maybe Long Island is

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cooler along the ocean, but here in the interior the air breathes upon the land like the heat from a furnace door. Another car comes upon us, passes, vanishes against that point on the horizon at which the two edges of the road converge. If we were to go straight on we would come to the ocean too, to Montauk Point.

The needle is now completely over to the right of the gauge, directly under the H. I am doing thirty-five. I have been doing it for the past hour, though the top speed of the car is no more than forty-five and even then you have to have a wind at your back. The car labors, the chugging of the motor distinct in the glaring midday stillness. I let up on the gas. Maybe it will cool down at thirty. It isn't enough the car is bad. It has to be the hottest day of the year, as though they held it back in reserve just for when we have to go. It must be ninety at least.

"What's the matter?" she says sharply. I can tell how she is sitting, the expression on her face, just from her voice.

"Nothing," I say. "She's heating up."

"Why did you slow down then?" she says. "Isn't it cooler the faster you go?"

I do not answer her. That's just like a woman. It's all that simple. My God, but I'd like some day to strand her out in the middle of nowhere with a dead car and a load of tools and let her see how simple it is.

"Isn't it?" she says.

"Isn't it what?"

"Isn't it cooler. I know I feel cooler the faster we go."

"No, it's not," I say.

I told her at the start. That's no car to make that kind of trip with in the summer I said. If your brother can miss one so can we. But she wouldn't listen. All she can say is If we can

make it in Harry's car why can't we make it in ours? What's the difference? Try and explain it to her. I'm no mechanic. I don't know the first damn thing about what's what under the hood. But one thing I do know is that a 1937 Plymouth isn't the same thing as a new, '47 Olds. Not by a long shot.

She is quiet now. We crawl along at thirty, the car laboring. Pilgrim Hospital, they call it. Pilgrim State Hospital. It must have taken Pilgrims to get to a place like that and then to decide to build a hospital there and then to build it. Out in the middle of nowhere like that. From time to time we go past houses set back from the road in groves of trees. They seem to sprawl, with an air about them like that of old castles, upon broad dark lawns. There is real money there. The ones on the North Shore are probably newer and brighter though. Cars are passing us more frequently now, vanishing eastward where there are white beaches and high cool breakers crashing slow and white along the land. I can see it clearly: the broad, quiet beach, the new cars parked under trees that line the rim of it, the smooth figures in repose beneath striped umbrellas. Not like Coney Island.

"My God, we'll never get there," she says under her breath.

"What?" I say.

"Can't we go a little faster?"

"No," I say. "I told you. You want the damn car to blow up in our face?"

"It's so late."

"We got all afternoon," I say. "Take it easy. So we'll be an hour late. You think he'll know the difference? He wouldn't know if we didn't come at all."

"That's not true," she says sharply. But there is sadness in her voice.

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He wouldn't though. They speak to him as if he could understand and he sits there in the white bathrobe thin from too much washing like those all the others wear, as though it were a kind of uniform, and he looks from one to the other of them and his face is empty, still, as though a light had been blown out behind the eyes and it is all dark there. I am sorry to see him like that, father-in-law or no father-in-law. He was all right. You don't bother me, I don't bother you. Sometimes he'd come over to supper and play with the kids and get a little high on Malaga. He always liked the kids. Now he doesn't even recognize them, the way he no longer recognizes any of us. I tell her it's pointless to drag the kids out there, since all they do is run around in the dirt and rubble of excavations there. There is nothing else for them to do. He likes to see them she says. Sure. They lead him out on the balcony, since kids are not admitted, and he looks at them and they look at him and it is as if they are in two different worlds, on two separate planets. Sometimes I even think they are frightened of him. He is always wearing the white bathrobe and his face has a yellow pallor. He was once a highcolored man with a hearty voice and he liked his wine. You would never know it. My God, the things that can happen to a man, that a man must endure.

The needle hangs under the H as if it is glued there. We have driven out of the houses and for some while now there has been nothing along the road. The land is wilder here, unkempt, with high weeds and tangled brush. Sometimes we see what I take to be a farmhouse beyond the brush, glaring in the bright heat. This would be some place for it to blow up on us. I slow down and pull off the road onto the dirt.

"What are you doing?" she says in a sudden, high voice. She

has awakened the kids. If I were to do something like that I'd hear about it clear into next month. I can hear the kids beginning to mutter to themselves, slowly, querulously, the way they do sometimes when I get them up for school. She says it again. "What are you doing?"

"I stopped. What's it look like?"

"What for? What's the matter?"

"She's too damn hot," I say. "You can't drive her when she's this hot."

"We'll be late," she says. She doesn't think that maybe this heap will break down and then we wouldn't get there at all.

"We'll just wait till she cools a little," I say. "It shouldn't take long."

We sit. Nothing is stirring. The grass and the trees are as still as something cut from paper, like the scenery for a play. Even their green appears lifeless, like the color of a garment faded from too much washing. I do not look back at her. I can imagine her sitting there stiffly, her arms folded, glaring at the back of my head with steady and irascible furiousness. I can't help it if the damned car is overheated. I told her.

The kids are full awake now. They are getting restless, their voices rising with querulousness. She snaps at them. She is probably just waiting for me to say something so she can use the same tone on me. Jerry has to leave the car. I have always thought he was developing a weak bladder. It never fails. It's because he is still only a child she says. Nine is not that much of a child I told her. Maybe she is right though. Maybe he will outgrow it after all. She tells him to get far back from the road so no one can see him. I hear him tramping back through the bushes, the sound of dry leaves and cracking twigs rising against the sunny silence. Then it ceases. The dial has not

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moved, as though it were an inked line drawn on a rectangle of cardboard. I look at it, feeling my collar damp and inert upon my neck like a wet rag. I loosen my tie and wipe my neck with a handkerchief.

"Well?" she says. "Can we go now?"

I turn in my seat. She is not the only one that is hot and bothered. "Look," I say angrily. "You know how to read a gauge at least, don't you? H is for hot. Do you understand? The needle is under H. But it's not supposed to be there. It's supposed to be midway between C and H. Can you understand that much? It's very simple."

She sits as if she has not heard me, her bright summer dress blotched with sweat at the armpits and about her waist where the girdle cuts into her flesh. She looks past me, her face stony, the frazzled ends of her hair pasted to her forehead. She leans forward, looking at the dashboard.

"That's right," I say in a harsh voice. "Take a good look. Now do you believe me?"

She says nothing for several moments, sitting there with her hands in her lap, holding in one hand a small handkerchief with which she wipes Ruth's face from time to time. When she finally speaks her voice is not apologetic but at least it is quieter. "Isn't there anything you can do?" she says.

I look again at the needle which has not moved at all. It is supposed to move upward right after you stop the car but maybe it hasn't for the simple reason that it is as far up as it can go. I must have stopped just in time. "I'll see," I tell her.

I get out of the car, my shirt peeling itself loose from the back of the seat. The sun burns upon the road, the car, the metal too hot to touch, to lean against. I wrap the handkerchief around my hand, using it as a glove, or more like it, a

pot holder, and lift the hood open. Heat breathes upon me in searing waves. Maybe if I keep the hood open it will cool down faster. I look down into the engine, the dismaying, conglomerate clutter of parts and wires, the heat of it upon my face. Thin shreds of smoke drift upward from somewhere alongside the body of the engine. Maybe it is supposed to be like that.

Jerry comes tramping out of the bushes and stands beside me. I hear him for some time before he emerges. He is only nine but he is big for his age. Some summer I will send him away to camp so he can see mountains, woods. He has never seen actual mountains. Some summer. A car appears without sound in the distance, grows, comes upon us with a whooshing rush and hurtles by blasting the still, hot air. "Get into the car," I say. "These maniacs with their new cars." But I do not curse. He obeys. I stand looking down at the engine, my hands on my hips. Then I look up the road after the car. It is already out of sight. I try not to think of the beach, the cool water, the soft lawns beneath tall cool trees. Some day, maybe. Probably not. Yet I have heard of men who have made fortunes starting out with only a two by four store, even if it wasn't a grocery. Sometimes they build an apartment house project—

I bend over and loosen the radiator cap. With the cap off it should cool down faster. I turn the cap and lift it. The water follows it upward immediately, as though I had pressed down a lever. It rises geyserlike over the hood and hangs for an instant upon its own upward motion before it curves outward for its descent, falling with almost a kind of weightless serene grace, like fireworks, spattering and sizzling upon the engine, the hood. I stand there in amazement, my arm still extended, holding the cap, and it is only after the water is all gone from

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the air that I realize it has fallen upon my arm, scalding it. I jerk my arm away and begin rubbing it, cursing under my breath. As I rub I become aware that I am dirtying my sleeve with my other hand. It looks like grease. It is my best shirt, a white on white which she insists I always wear to the hospital. At least you'll look like a gentleman once a month she says. I hope she is satisfied now.

She is calling from inside the car. "What happened?" she says. "What is it?"

I stand looking down at the steaming engine, the open radiator in which there is now no water at all. I stand there cursing, furiously and almost audibly. I have not cursed like this since I have been married. She gets out of the car, the children at her heels like small dogs.

"Get them back in the car," I say angrily. "You want them killed?"

She seems to come to an abrupt halt. She looks at me out of a baffled, faintly alarmed face. I look back at her. I do not know what she sees in my face, but she quickly turns and shoos the children back into the car. Maybe I ought to look at her like that more often. When the children are back in the car she comes over to me. Her dress is all rumpled from the sweat and the sitting. It is a new dress which she has put on especially for the visit, but you could never tell from looking at it. She stands there, discomposed, fretted, dabbing at her forehead with her small handkerchief, not knowing how to begin. She does not look me in the face. "Is anything wrong?" she asks. "I saw the water—."

"No," I say harshly. "Nothing at all is wrong. Absolutely nothing. I always change the radiator water this way."

"Change the water?" she says.

"Sure," I say. "It was too hot, wasn't it? Now we can put in some cool water. It'll cool the car down."

She does not know whether to take what I say at face value or not. "Jerry says he saw a stream somewhere back there," she begins, slowly, tentatively. "Maybe—."

"Sure," I say. "That'll be fine. Only what'll I carry it in?"

"We have the thermos with Ruth's milk," she says. "I could empty it. It's only a pint thermos, but—."

"No," I say. "I've got a better idea. I'll hike to that stream and dip my handkerchief in it and then hike back, careful so I don't lose any of it, and I'll wring it into the radiator and then hike back again and dip it and hike back and maybe by doomsday—."

She stands staring blankly up the road, wringing her handkerchief. "I was only trying to be helpful," she says quietly.

"I know, I know," I say. Then I begin to curse again, rubbing my arm where it still burns.

"The children," she says.

"They'll have to hear it sooner or later," I say.

But I stop. I stand there feeling sweat move slowly along my flesh, looking down at the engine, at the car that I had known all along what to expect from but which, now that it has happened, I feel has betrayed me. I kick viciously at the front wheel. She looks at me. From inside the car the kids look at me.

"Wait in the car," I say.

There is nothing else for me to do. All I can do is hope that there is one just a short ways up the road. Yet I can already see myself hiking three, four miles in this heat to find a filling station and then hiking it back again hauling a big two gallon

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can of water. That's always been my kind of luck. I turn and start up the road.

"Where are you going?" she says in a surprised voice.

"Wait in the car like I said," I tell her without pausing, without looking back.

I go on. The sun stands high above the road, stationary and brilliant. When I look into it it burns with an effect as of pulsating, as though expanding and contracting, like a motion picture of the heart. The sky is a thin pale blue, as though the constant sun has bleached the color from it. I stride against the still air, the silence. I come to a sign facing into the traffic like a stiffened and annealed palm. It reads: *Brentwood 14 Montauk 75*. That means we are only about twelve miles from the hospital. I had no idea we were that close. It is just like my luck, I think. And sixty-three miles beyond that. Not even a two hour drive. My shirt is now completely soaked, as though I have stepped from a shower of tepid water. I spit upon the road at the foot of the sign. I go on.

It is as I feared. There are no houses along the road, though sometimes I believe I can see rooftops in the distance. It is not three, four miles, but I walk a long distance before I come to a filling station. Even if I wanted to hitch it, the few cars that pass are going too fast to stop for me. Assuming they wanted to.

It is not really a filling station. It is a tall frame farmhouse with two gas pumps in a clearing before it. The house is weathered, old; raw wood shows through the split, brittle paint. They must need whatever extra cash those pumps can bring in. Maybe they are planning to get a house on the North Shore too. In a field beyond the house two cows stand beneath a tree. Even cows have sense enough to get out of the sun. I

stand alongside the pumps, shading my eyes and looking up at the house. My shoes are powdered with dust. I have a sensation as of dust coating my entire body beneath the dank clothing. Nothing stirs, though I can hear the quiet clucking of chickens.

"Anything I can do for you, mister?" a voice says brightly.

He has come from around the far side of the house, which was why I did not see him immediately. He stands for a minute inside the narrow shade the house casts on that side, looking at me, as though he is sizing me up; the powdered dress shoes, the pressed suit pants, the white on white shirt even if it is dirtied, the tie. But he is friendly. You always hear those stories about how farmers are suspicious of city people. But certainly not this one. He is a young man, broad and tall the way you would expect a farmer would be, wearing coveralls and what looks to be a denim shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. I can't imagine why a man would choose to wear a longsleeved shirt in this weather. But then, I shouldn't talk.

"I need some water," I say. "My car boiled over. I'd appreciate it if you could let me have some."

He comes out of the shade toward me, smiling pleasantly. "It sure is hot enough, ain't it?" he says. "How far back are you?"

"I don't really know," I say. "I'd say about a mile and a half, give or take a couple of yards."

He laughs. He has a pleasant, affable laugh. Yet he does not take his eyes from me. I guess I do look a little touched by the sun, or like an apparition perhaps, strolling along the road in a six dollar white on white shirt and a silk tie. He says, "That's a long walk in this kind of weather."

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"You don't have to tell me," I say.

I do not mind just standing and talking with him, except that I would rather be in the shade. I can imagine her getting fretted and nervous back there in the car, wondering what has become of me. It is not that I am inconsiderate. It is because in the back of my mind is the thought of that hike back with the water, that I stand there talking. The thought strikes in me almost a kind of dread. I do not smoke or drink much, just a little beer now and then. But I am not as young as I used to be. In the field a cow lows. At least the cows are in the shade.

"You out of gas too?" he asks. "You know, trouble always comes in pairs."

I tell him thank God, at least that is not the other to the pair, if it is a pair. I can just see myself hauling back a can of gasoline as well.

"Filled up in the city, huh?" he says.

"The city?" I say.

"You're from New York, ain't you?" he says.

It is funny how he can tell. I have heard about that, how all they have to do is look at you. It must be the shirt and tie.

"Yes," I say. "That's right."

"It's an awful hot day to walk a mile and a half," he says. He smiles. "Give or take a few yards."

We laugh a little at that, quietly, looking out over the road. "It sure is," I say.

"What were you going to carry that water in?" he asks.

"I figured you might have a can or something," I say.

"That can'd be awful heavy," he says. It is very nice of him to be so concerned.

"I guess so," I say.

"I guess you're kind of impatient to get down to the beach," he says.

I look at him. "The beach?"

"Or are you going fishing?" he says, quite seriously, looking me in the face.

"No," I begin. "I'm—." I stop. Go tell him I am bound for the nuthouse to see my father-in-law. On the hottest day of the year. He might think I belong there with him. "No," I say. "I'm out here just visiting some friends."

"Oh," he says. He stoops and takes up a twig from the dust and stands looking out over the road, his hands playing with the twig. "It sure is hot," he says.

I think of her back there in the car. She must be worried sick by now. I wipe my forehead and look up at the sun that seems not to have moved at all along that sky pale and flat as a sheet of metal, burning down upon the land. A car rushes by, going east. Much as I would like just to stand here, I say, "Listen. About that water."

He does not look at me, playing with the twig. "It'd be awful hard work, hauling a can full of water up that road," he says.

You do not really know people until you speak to them, deal with them. I would never have expected such concern from a stranger. "I guess I'll have to make the best of it," I say.

He looks out over the road. "I could give you a lift," he says in a slow voice. "I got a little pickup truck back there in the shed."

"That would be very kind of you," I say.

"I'm busy working around in back now," he says with no change in his voice. "But a little something ought to cover the time I'll be losing."

"A little something?" I say.

"Sure. Say five dollars," he says. He turns and looks at me, a bland smile like that of a clothing store salesman on his face. He says, "That ain't much for saving you the trouble of hauling water up that road."

"Five dollars?" I say.

"Uh huh," he says. "That's little enough, considering the trouble."

I still do not know what else he has in mind, though the quality of his concern is now quite clear. Yet for a moment I am tempted. It would make it so easy. You climb into the truck, and a few minutes later there you are, sitting all the way. You are even out of the sun. But I say, "No, I'm afraid that's kind of steep for me. I guess I'll just have to manage hauling it back."

He is quiet for a moment, looking at me, still smiling. Then he looks down at the ground, moving one foot in the dust. "Funny thing," he says quietly. "I just remembered. The water pipe's busted."

"What's that?" I say. I look at him, his downbent head.

"Sorry," he says, making cryptic markings in the dust with his foot. "That's real bad luck. I just remembered. The pipe's busted and the can's got a hole in it." He looks at me, obliquely, from under his downturned brows. "The next filling station's over at Brentwood," he says. He stands there, waiting, as though he expects me to retract and begin digging into my pocket for my wallet, upon his face that slick easy smile I should have known immediately had no business on the face of a man who makes his money by his own sweat and the labor of his ten fingers. He will have that house on the North Shore a lot sooner than I will, that's for sure.

"You are a son of a bitch," I say.

It's not the five dollars. That's a steep price for taking a man a mile and a half up the road but it's not that. I don't mind paying my way. I always have. I have learned not to expect anything in this world for nothing, except trouble perhaps, and God knows that is no bargain. It is the coercion, the blackmail. And after all that affability and smiling too. He would be more in character operating with a mask and a gun. I don't have anything against his charging for the ride, or for the use of the car even, but I'll be damned if I'll be blackmailed into paying for something that all he has to do is turn a faucet to get, and at no extra cost to him.

"Now hold on there," he says, stiffening.

He is younger than I am, and he is bigger, and standing before his own house inside of which there are probably five others like him. It would not surprise me, since that is the way things have been running. But I go on. There is a point beyond which a man will not be pushed, to hell with the consequences. "You are a lousy, hypocritical, money-squeezing son of a bitch," I say.

He holds the twig in one hand, moving it at his side as if it were a club and he is about to beat me with it. "You're gonna get into trouble in a minute, talking like that, mister," he says. But he does not move. Maybe it is something he sees in my face. Maybe he just does not want to hurt me.

I stand there, cursing him steadily and furiously. I have been married twelve years and God knows I have had occasions enough to use obscenity, but in the past hour I have cursed more than in all the twelve years put together. Then I am through. I turn and stride up the road, back toward the car, leaving him there.

I go swiftly, the blood pounding in my head. He is probably

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telling the truth about the next filling station being at Brentwood. And that one's probably run by his brother. It takes me far less time to get back to the car than it did for me to go the other way. They are all out of the car. The kids are playing in the bushes and she is sitting on the running board watching them. She has spread a paper bag beneath her, to keep her dress from being dirtied. It is not a large bag, and so she overlaps it on one side, the bag not large enough to protect her completely. Twelve years ago it would have been.

As I come up to the car she rises. "What?" she says.

"The thermos," I say. "The one you have Ruth's milk in."

She stares at me, as she would at a stranger. I must look a sight. "It's only a pint," she says. "I told you that. You said—."

"Never mind what I said," I tell her abruptly, harshly.

I do not pause. I go past her, bending into the back seat, rummaging there for the thermos. I find it in the far corner, beneath her handbag. I straighten out of the car, she still watching me, her face troubled, uncomprehending, mute with dismay. I unscrew the cap savagely, as though I were assaulting it, and pour what little milk is left on the ground. She watches me, saying nothing. I go past her, not looking at her, moving at full tilt back toward where she said earlier the stream was. If I look like a lunatic she's got no one to blame but herself. It wasn't my idea to come out to this godforsaken place. The stream is almost a hundred yards from the road. I have to cross broken ground, interspersed with stones and wild, tangled bushes, to get to it. Upon my feet there is now the unmistakable sensation of dust, as though beneath the shoes, the socks, they are covered with a patina of it.

It is not much of a stream. It is shallow and runs slowly, without sound, glaring the sunlight back into the static air. I pause, standing over it, panting, looking down at it, at the

sunlight upon it as upon glass. Then I look at the puny thermos. I would not be much worse off with a thimble. I am all wet again, breathing hard. A man gets so tired sometimes. In a nearby tree a bird sings once, solitary and distinct. I squat, tilting the thermos against the current, the water cool upon my hand.

It takes me what seems an interminable time to cover the ground back to the car. I walk holding the thermos gingerly, as though I am carrying nitroglycerin, since there is little enough in it as it is and I have forgotten the cork. Nevertheless, I spill about a quarter of it. She is still standing alongside the car, as though she has not moved since I left her, watching me out of that mute, forlorn face. She watches me as I gravely pour the trivial quantity of water into the radiator, chary of each drop.

As I turn to go back she says, "Will we be able to get back home without any trouble?"

"Home?" I say.

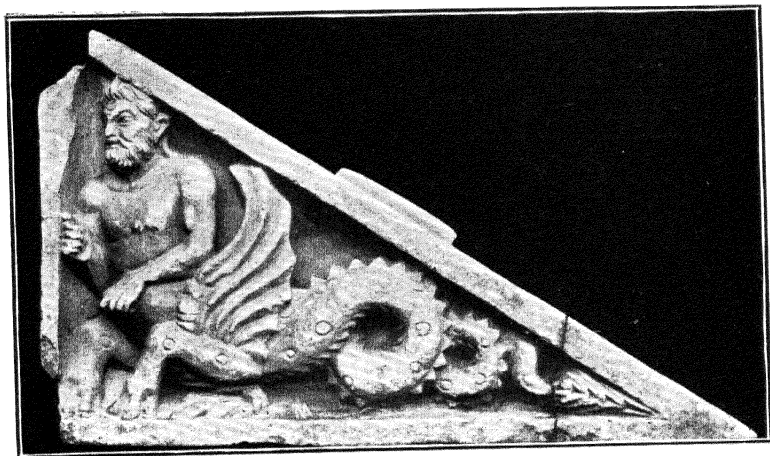
She looks at me, baffled again, wringing her handkerchief, her bright summer dress rumpled and soiled. She says, "Aren't we—?"

"There's over an hour visiting time left," I say. "We may only get in fifteen minutes of it but at least we'll show up so the old man can see not everyone's forgotten him."

She looks at me. "But—," she says.

"Don't 'but' so much," I say.

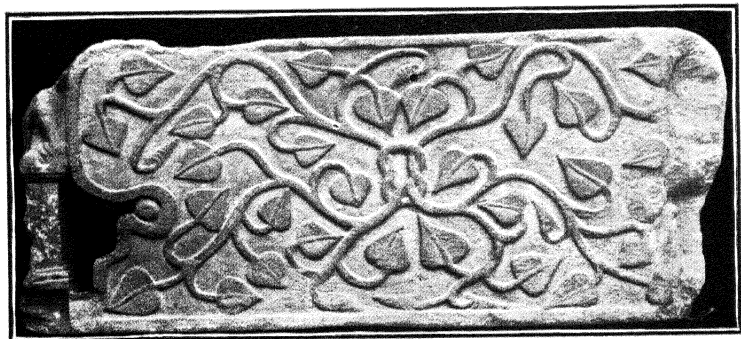
I am already striding past her, back toward the stream. Because I'll be goddamned if something like a car that has cost me less than four hundred dollars and a slick chiseler in farmer's clothing are going to make up my mind for me and decide for me where I will or won't go, after all the trouble I have been through. I'll be goddamned first.



(a) No. 14 L, ICHTHYOCENTAUR, pp. 8, 11, 83, 106.



(b) No. 24 L, FRIEZE OF STANDING FIGURES, pp. 8, 11, 106.



(c) No. 15 L, CONVENTIONAL DESIGN OF *pipal* LEAVES WITH TENDRILS, pp. 11, 106.

IN A VALLEY

THE SERGEANT SAT stiffly as he drove, as though at attention even then. At his side sat the captain, looking gravely out over the seared fields, the land which man and nature both had conspired to devastate. At their backs lay the town, a clutter of squat and squalid buildings out of which, dazzling and white in the fierce Italian sun, a church steeple rose. The jeep bumped and jolted over the road, baked now hard as stone. The sergeant drove in a straight line, avoiding neither pothole nor hump, both he and the captain sedately suspended in midair for those infinitesimal fractions of a second that the jeep fell away regularly from beneath them, seated on nothing more than the air itself with the casual obliviousness of a vaudeville team.

The sergeant was the more intent of the two. Before him the road ribboned across the broad plain, losing itself in the distance. It was there, out toward the horizon, where the river lay and beyond that the ragged foothills, that a plume of dust rose faintly against the sky. He watched the dust, suspended on the horizon like a portent. Going fast as he could since they had left the town, he had drawn no closer to it. From a distance its motion appeared infinitesimal. But he knew the truck, load of replacements or no, on such a road, could make almost as

good time as they, the jeep. All right, he told himself. There will be time. It was as though, up to that moment, so intent was he on overtaking the truck, it had not occurred to him they were bound for the same destination, the camp, set twelve miles from the town on one bank of a broad, sunny river the other side of which was still in contest, neither firmly theirs nor the enemy's.

The jeep's speed did not slacken perceptibly. But the sergeant was no longer watching the dust. He sat looking neither right nor left. He was a slender man, with pale eyes and without the slightest amount of slack to his flesh or beneath it, as though his flesh were made of rubber. He did not look Jewish. He looked like no particular national or racial type or stereotype at all. In the dress of an American noncommissioned officer, at the wheel of an American jeep, he evoked no second looks, no expressions of surprise. Yet he was barely an American citizen; he had been an American soldier first. By birth he was German. He came from a family of Hamburg merchants, German Jews whose history was indivisible from that of the city to which they had come more than two hundred years before. In the city they had attained some small eminence through their prosperousness; their sons had died in German wars. Then all at once this ceased to be enough. Upon their advent the Nazis began to measure nationality by blood, producing from among old records documents on lineage and primogeniture though at no time had his family made any attempt to deny their Jewishness. There had been a hearing. (They still did things formally at that time, with that semblance and facade of legality which later they were to abandon entirely, as though they did not yet believe or know the full scope of their power.) In the end his father had been arrested,

arrest spreading outward among his family in constant, broadening ripples, so that faces long familiar and as irrevocable to his child's mind as the sky and the sun itself, were seen for one last time and then gone, vanished; swallowed up in a void the others could only guess at and dared not name.

He had fled with an uncle to Switzerland. There were relatives in France and Venezuela to whom they could go next. His uncle told him he could take his pick, they would all have him.

"Which is the strongest?" he asked immediately.

His uncle did not understand. "They're all pretty old," he said. "But if you want to count their children—"

"No," he said, quite sharply. "Not them. The countries. Which of those countries is the strongest?"

"Oh," his uncle said. "Well, France is pretty strong. And—"

"No, I don't mean that, either," he said. "Which country is the strongest in the world, stronger than Germany?"

It was then his uncle understood, though still not fully. "America, I guess," he said. "At least it's bigger than Germany." And then he looked at his nephew. He looked up and saw in his eyes hatred so old and terrible and black, he could not believe he was looking into the eyes of a fourteen year old boy.

"All right then," his nephew said. "I want to go to America."

Eventually he did. First he went to England, where he remained eleven months with cousins of his father. When they left for the United States, he went with them. He was fifteen then. He already spoke English fluently, having studied it in Germany as well. The day war was declared on Germany he went directly to the small table in the lobby of the post office building, draped with enlistment posters and at which sat a

burly sergeant who spent his entire day joking with passing girls and old men alike, and joined the army.

The captain knew all this. He knew what the sergeant felt at that moment. When he thought the sergeant had calmed sufficiently, though they were still going too fast over a road made by and for horse and cart, for his liking, he said: "Look. Why don't you just forget all about it? Just don't think about it."

"Sure," the sergeant said, not looking at him.

"I mean it," the captain said. "It doesn't pay to let something like that get you."

"All right," the sergeant said. "I won't, then."

"I know how hard it must be, after what you have been through."

"You don't know the half of it," the sergeant said. He looked straight ahead, out toward the horizon where now the dust had ceased, diminishing, no more now than a faint, fading smudge to mark in the distance where the camp, the river, lay.

"I get my share of that kind of stuff every day. If a man were to take seriously every stupid remark he heard, he would go out of his mind," the captain said.

"You're one hundred percent right," the sergeant said.

The captain sat scanning the countryside on his side of the road, so like that on the other: the fields gouged and pitted, the trees blasted, standing black and ruined in the glare of full noon, the grass brittle and spare. Yet from out in the fields, above the engine's roar, they heard birds.

"We have to forgive each other a little," the captain said. Unlike most men who laid down moral precepts, the captain did not absolve himself. The sergeant knew him to take prisoners, with possible risk to his own life, in situations where

others would simply have shot them. "Now and then we have to turn the other cheek. God knows there is enough suffering in the world as it is."

"I won't even think about it," the sergeant said. He did not look at the captain. "I'll pretend it never happened."

The captain touched him on the arm. "Good," he said.

What it was that happened, was this. Several times a week the captain made the trip into town, the sergeant chauffeuring him. The trips were part business, part pleasure. Though he could have communicated with division headquarters by phone, he chose to drive the twelve miles to town, to sit for a brief while in the impromptu officers' lounge (formerly the huge basement room had been filled with a series of prison cells) enjoying those small amenities he believed vanished from the face of the earth the moment he left for camp. Headquarters had been set up in a square, whitewashed two storey building situated in the center of the town, opposite the church. In turn it had served as a hall of justice, headquarters for the local Fascisti, and site (as had the church; together the two buildings commanded the town square) of final German resistance in the town.

On that particular day, they arrived at headquarters to find a group of replacements standing about the square, awaiting assignment. The truck in which they had come stood before the entrance to headquarters. On either side was the usual busy array of staff cars and jeeps, covered with a light, uniform dust almost to the door handles, as though they traveled not upon solid earth but through some viscid, rarer medium, as a ship travels through water. The truck's engine had been left running. The men stood in larger clumps than usual, in sixes and sevens. There were about thirty in all. They stood or

squatted in the shade. Some passed a canteen. When the jeep came into the square they ceased, watching, arrested in attitudes of spurious nonchalance.

The sergeant did not so much as glance at them, yet he knew how they would be standing, in what positions, what expressions on their faces. He pulled the jeep in at the far end of the row of parked cars, away from the truck, though a group of the new men stood there too, dust upon their boots, their packs and weapons nearby, in a heap against the wall. Even with the engine still running he heard the talking, the one voice which had not ceased or faltered with the rest when the jeep swung into the square, as though the speaker was more afraid than the others, so afraid he dared not stop even for a moment, show his fear for a moment. This was before the sergeant could even hear what he was saying. He heard what the other was saying as he was proceeding across the small, plazalike area directly before the building entrance, and he and the captain came to a dead stop at the same instant, in step, as though at a given command while from across the square, the sunny silence, the words spoken in a clear, brazen, faintly intolerable voice reached and overtook them. "That's God's truth," the soldier was saying. "I don't mind fighting but I want it to be against the Japs, not the Germans. I got nothing against them. Personally, I think they got a good idea, getting rid of those Jews like that. That's something the U.S. government ought to think about. The kikes started this stinking, goddamned war and they ought to be out here fighting it, not loyal Americans like us, getting killed while they are home raking in all the dough."

The sergeant's first reaction was one of disbelief. He thought at once, I am hearing things. What served almost to convince

him of it was the calm, heedless manner in which the others stood listening, as though they were being told nothing more than the time of day or the weather. But the captain had stopped too. And he could still hear the words, the voice; iterant, bragging, quite loud. He started to turn back. No sooner had he begun to move than the captain's hand was upon his arm, the captain's voice in his ear. "Come on," the captain said. "Don't pay any attention to him. He doesn't know what he's talking about. He's just a scared kid sounding off." And he felt himself held back, snared in the thin strong thread of the captain's voice, while his blood boiled and boiled. With his voice alone, and the touch of hand to arm, the captain drew him out of the square and into the building, the cool, dark cave of the lobby where they stood a moment in the faint glare of refracted sunlight. Behind them orderlies hurried to and fro. It was doubtful if the sergeant knew where he had been led, at that moment. He stood there, his face stony with rage, while the captain spoke on and on, his voice placative, gentle, absolving both the sergeant's rage and the cause of it. All the while the sergeant did not take his eyes from the figure out in the square.

Finally he said to the captain, "All right." His voice was quiet, too quiet.

"Are you sure?" the captain asked.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I won't start anything. You have my word."

The captain released him, hand and voice both. "He's just a stupid kid," he said. "He's not worth the bother."

"You're right," the sergeant said.

But no sooner did the captain leave him than he went directly to the officer in charge of the group. He was a second

lieutenant, young, cleanshaven, just out of Officers Candidate School by his appearance. "Sir, could you tell me the name of that man over there?" he said. He pointed to the other, the figure lounging against the wall, his legs crossed, his helmet tilted jauntily upon the back of his head, one hand hooked under his belt. The lieutenant told him.

He thanked the lieutenant. He turned and crossed the square, stirring the soft dust underfoot, the lieutenant looking after him. He walked slowly, breathing slowly, deeply, repeating the name to himself not as a man would who is afraid he will forget it, but because it gave him actual pleasure. Waggoner, he said to himself, over and over. George Henry Waggoner.

He could not have said at what moment he had determined the course of his vengeance. He thought of it as that, as requital for all the outraged and slain relations and friends of his childhood. When he learned that Waggoner was among those new replacements assigned to his platoon he thought: Good. That ought to save me some trouble, at least. It was not that he had deliberately chosen not to heed the captain. He did not even think of him, his words. They were as irrelevant as news of a flood in China.

He in no way singled out Waggoner. He watched him, as from a great height; unceasing, covert. Yet he made no move, treated him no harsher. He doesn't even know I am Jewish, he said. This was so. Only the captain knew, and then only because they had been together for so long, fighting together all through Italy and in North Africa before that. And even the captain had been surprised. "But your name's Bill Brown," he had said in a tone of complete astonishment when he found out. It was, but this was but the anglicized version of Wolfgang Brauner, adopted for him by his father's cousins, who

had reasoned that in a time of imminent war with Germany such a version would serve better.

That was in August. Early in September word came that the entire division was to advance, to move beyond the river over which they had been parrying off and on with German patrols for a full two months. He heard this directly from the captain himself. Ahh, he thought immediately, thinking not about the advance but about his vengeance, which hinged upon the advance. At last. At long last, he thought.

By this time most of the men in the company had come to believe that because of some tie or relationship they could not ascertain and did not know about, he was favoring Waggoner. He had not intended to do so. Yet in attempting not to give himself away before time, he had been leaning over backward without knowing it. This was evident in all his relations with Waggoner, from failing to send him out on patrols to exempting him from so many of the trivial but odious duties to which the others were subject, and which they resented. He first learned of this from Swanson, a short, cocky soldier who obeyed orders with a promptness and intelligence no sergeant expected and more than he hoped for, provided only the orders were just. Swanson stopped him one day as he came from mess.

"Hey, sarge," Swanson said. "Exactly what is it?"

"What is what?" the sergeant said.

"You don't look alike," Swanson said. "It couldn't be that he's your brother."

"Who's not my brother?"

"Waggoner," Swanson said, watching him.

"Are you crazy?" the sergeant said.

But Swanson said, calmly, with only a faint shadow of a smile, "Well, then. If he's not your brother, then he must have

something on you. Did he catch you cutting up your old man, or something? It's got to be something like that, otherwise why does he get out of all the crap details the rest of us get stuck with? I'd be happy to hear it."

He finally got rid of Swanson without giving anything away, matching him banter for banter while all the time he struggled to contain his amazement at such a turn. Yet it was better than he had planned. It was as though so remorseless was his hate, it turned to advantage possibilities his thinking had not even considered. Later, seeing Waggoner stand idly about as he did day after day, speaking in his loud, brazen way to any who would listen, his face rigid in its expression of callow resentment, across which slow shreds of cigarette smoke drifted, the sergeant thought: Now they won't suspect a thing, for sure.

The advance began slowly. Though there had been German patrols just the other side of the river they had been meager and few, with the main body back in the foothills, where defensive positions were far stronger. When all the supplies had come up, the division moved across the river with a good deal of noise and commotion, hugger mugger as it were, without meeting any opposition at all. September was as hot as August. All during the march across the plain the sun beat and beat upon them out of a cloudless sky. The march took three days, by which time the men were as exhausted as if they had been through an entire campaign, though they had met only token opposition here and there, exchanges between patrols in dark groves of trees or out in the fields among the tall, brown grass. Once they were among the foothills, the fighting began in earnest.

Immediately the advance foundered upon a series of small, deadly defensive posts strung across the foothills—in crevices,

behind clumps of trees—like so many hornets' nests, bursting into fierce and sudden fury upon contact. One such post lay in the path of their platoon. The captain summoned the sergeant. "I want a patrol up there," he said. "I want to know if there are two or ten or twenty men up there. And I want them out of there before nightfall."

The sergeant returned to where the men waited, crouched upon the sloping terrain beneath an overhang covered with sparse brush and weeds. He walked with a light, almost buoyant step and when he stopped before the others and squatted down to their height, the expression upon his face was one of sheer joy. "We want to find out what they've got up there," he said. "I'll need five men." He paused. "Any volunteers?"

There was no response. There was an interval during which the only sound was the click and buzz of insects, as if the war itself had ceased. "Are you going up, sarge?" one of the men asked at length.

"No. You'll be going up with Corporal Yates."

He waited, looking from one to the other, the downbent heads and averted faces from among which no volunteers would come. And who can blame them, he thought. Yet his breathing came faster now, lighter, as though he breathed an element rarer than air. "All right," he said. "The following men have volunteered." He called off five names. Waggoner's was the third. "You'll leave within the half hour."

He rose and went down the slope to report to the captain. Halfway down he stopped. Certain that he was not being observed, he stepped within a clump of trees nearby. In the sudden shade he felt cool, alone. He looked out from among the trees, the shade; squinting. The scene was exactly as he had dreamed it night after night: the figure he had first seen

in the town square all those weeks ago quiet at last, the brazen voice stilled, the brazen face corrupted by fear. He watched, motionless, almost invisible in the shade, as Waggoner mechanically checked his rifle, grenades, wrist watch, his movements sluggish and uncertain, as though dread were paralysis too, a full minute behind the others. He watched without pity, remote, as though from another planet. He believed he had played it well, saving Waggoner for just such a patrol since the earlier ones across the river had been without risk, a sort of game almost, between the Germans and them. When the patrol moved beyond the overhang and out of sight at last, there came to his mind one final bitter and savage comment: What's he so worried about, anyway? They're his friends. They should recognize each other on sight.

When he watched the patrol move off that afternoon he believed it to be the last time he would see Waggoner alive. Three hours later, its mission accomplished, the patrol, the remnants of the patrol, returned. Waggoner was among them, terrified, still mute, but unhurt nonetheless. Watching the corpsmen as they immediately set about to minister to the wounded, the sergeant spoke to himself: All right. There will be other times. This is going to be a long war.

He took to sending Waggoner on patrol at every occasion. These were now mostly patrols he led. He found at length that he could place Waggoner in situations of greater and greater peril only by leading him there himself. Yet each time Waggoner emerged unhurt, whole. Both of them did. It was as though it had become his fate to go unscathed through the entire war with Waggoner always at his side, just beyond his elbow. And there had developed this irony: the more patrols he took Waggoner on in an effort to get him killed, the more

skilled Waggoner became, the more adept, so that the possibilities of his, say, approaching a defended house a little too far from the wall, or raising his head at the wrong moment during an attack, which the sergeant had not only hoped for but actually counted on, diminished.

Of the two things the sergeant feared most would thwart him, the second now occurred. The captain learned of the frequency with which he assigned Waggoner to patrol. Perhaps he had learned it from Waggoner himself, perhaps not. Perhaps he simply had been watching the sergeant, inscrutable, remote, with that remote and godlike patience with which the sergeant in turn had watched Waggoner. One day he sent for the sergeant.

He found the captain in a clearing, seated at a plain wooden table such as those used for picnics. Spread before him were various maps of the area, an Italian-English dictionary, and scattered sheets of typewritten memoranda. The captain did not hear the sergeant come up; he sat slumped upon himself, his elbows on the table, his chest caved, staring vacantly into space. There had come a lull in the campaign: during combat the captain never permitted himself so open a display of fatigue, of sheer exhaustion. When the sergeant announced himself the captain half rose as if from sleep, startled, disoriented for the moment, as a sleepwalker would be, staring wildly about. He calmed in an instant. He began immediately. "You gave me your word," he said.

"I know," the sergeant said quietly.

"And yet for the past two months you have been doing everything you can to get him shot. Don't deny it," he said, raising his voice, looking up at the sergeant and lifting one hand in a gesture whose aim and purpose was to forestall that

protest which hadn't yet even formed in the sergeant's face. "You don't send a new man out on patrol day after day because you have taken a liking to him and you want him to get the country air."

But he did not smile. Neither did the sergeant. He stood before the captain, looking down at him. At one end of the table stood two thin trees, their sparse and brittle boughs casting shadows delicate as lacework. The captain again stared into space. He sat, unkempt, his uniform rumpled, two full days' growth of beard upon his face. It's as though he just doesn't care any more, the sergeant thought. He believed if at that moment he turned and strode away, the captain would not even remember he had been there. He thought: He's probably imagining he is back home, in bed, with nothing more to decide than what to have for dinner.

So he was not listening the first time the captain said it. "Pity," the captain said. Then he said it again. He looked up at the sergeant, stiffly erect before him, dressed in a fresh, carefully pressed uniform, his boots polished. "I know what you must feel," he said softly.

"Do you?" the sergeant said.

"Even if I don't," the captain said. He made a gesture with one hand, slow, a little aimless. "Isn't there enough killing and hate in the world? You should know most of all. Your family—"

"You don't have to remind me," the sergeant said.

The captain looked straight at him, in his eyes that quality of command with which he led men in battle, in his voice. "I *want* to remind you," he said. "Every minute of every day. So you don't forget. So you don't become so obsessed with hate you forget what pain and suffering are."

Now the sergeant's face was hard. He looked down at the

captain, glaring, his eyes cold. "I haven't forgotten," he said.

"Then you'll think twice before you inflict it on others," the captain said. Then he rose, heavily, as though he could not sustain the weight of his own flesh. He walked to the end of the table and stood looking off across the valley while the sergeant thought harshly and bitterly: Am I supposed to get down and kiss the backside of every man who spits in my face?

But he said nothing. The captain stood beneath the sparse trees, his thigh resting against the table. Though it was yet early in the day the valley had darkened. The sun went down quickly behind the jagged, upflung mountain walls which towered in a ring about them; though here it was still mild for November, snow glittered on distant peaks. Regarding the captain, the spent, still figure about which the last of light seemed to gather and concentrate, the sergeant thought: He has had too much. Once he was a good officer but he has been at it too long. That's what it is.

As though he could read the other's mind the captain said, "It's not the war so much, though it's that too. But I keep thinking that this is a mean, stinking enough world as it is, without a man making it worse if he can help it."

"And I—," the sergeant said.

The captain turned. He faced the sergeant. "Yes. You can help it, since you know what it is. Someone has to. Otherwise it will go on and on and there will be no reprieve, no hope, ever." He stopped. From the sergeant's angle of vision the captain appeared taller than the mountain opposite. The captain, the trees, a tent nearby, stood black as silhouettes against what light remained in the sky. All light was gone from the valley; the sergeant could no longer distinguish trees, distant farmhouses, the town they were to move on to next. From

the tent an orderly, silhouetted for an instant in a glare of light from beyond the flap, came and carefully removed the papers from the table.

The captain went back to his chair and sat down with a sigh. "Who knows," he said, lightly, smiling a little. "One day he might save your life."

"It's possible," the sergeant said.

But he had already started back to his tent when the captain called after him from the dark, "Remember. I have your word. No more patrols."

The sergeant paused, looking back, knowing exactly how the captain sat though he could no longer see him. "Yes," he said clearly and evenly. "You have my word."

The assault on the town began three days later, just as the sun rose above the eastern wall, lighting up the valley. The sergeant lay in a field of poppies some mile or so from the town while four planes came out of the sky with a sudden, thunderous roar, the poppies sucking with a long sigh in their wake. They sped across the valley and dropped their meager, puny bombs into the town's yawning stillness, then continued on to the end of the valley from whence they returned in a moment, strafing now, their wingtips barely beyond the slow bright lick of flames, the rising pall of smoke. When they had done this four or five times they came across the field and dipped one wing, then rose and passed from the valley.

At a signal the men rose, the captain in the fore. He was cleanshaven, peremptory, terse. Watching him gesture and command, the sergeant thought, He is almost like his old self. They entered the town without resistance, though from the north where another platoon was to enter they heard immediately the sound of automatic weapons fire, carrying distinctly

upon the morning air. Once on the streets they broke into smaller groups. The captain went up one street, the sergeant another. There were twelve men in the sergeant's group, including Waggoner. They proceeded into the town, thinned back along the street in double file, a line on either side. Though at no time did he look back, the sergeant could, at a given moment, have told Waggoner's position exactly; how many men back, how many feet.

He is trying to prove something, he thought. He did not resent the fact that the captain had placed Waggoner with him deliberately. Since the time he and the captain had spoken neither had Waggoner been on patrol. If that's the way he wants it, he had told himself. He moved quickly, alertly, his face alert and calm above the slant of the BAR. Now and then along the street they passed where a bomb had fallen, a raw tear in the earth, a gaped and smoking wall.

They were well into the town before they came anywhere near the fighting. When they heard the abrupt clatter of gunfire nearby they ceased, tense, watchful, still as statues, until the sergeant signalled from over his shoulder. The sergeant stood in a doorway, squinting up the street into the eastern sky. At the sound of firing a strange light had come into his eyes, of elation and cold, deadly furiousness. His immediate impulse was to rush forward where the firing was, firing himself. Instead he crouched in the doorway squinting over the black muzzle of the BAR while the others leapfrogged past him, appearing for an instant before him to vanish beyond, in some doorway or behind some corner up the street. Immobile, watchful, he counted them off by name as they passed: Yates, Puso, Swanson, Waggoner, Montgomery. . . . When they were all past him, he in his turn stepped from the doorway and raced

some forty feet over the broken and rubble street, his rifle held high, his face fixed undeviatingly forward so that as he went by the others saw him in profile; the white nostril, the one cold, furious eye, the upper lip drawn back a little from the teeth. They were not yet directly under fire.

They leapfrogged twice more before the sudden burst and whine of rifle fire was upon them. A sniper, the sergeant thought. Unerringly he picked out the building from which the shots had come, though he had seen no movement in the gaped, open windows, no rifle flash. Good, he thought. His face remained cold, deadly; coldly elated. But he ceased at once to look at the building. He appeared to look straight before him, over the empty street upon which sunlight glared. When the men began to leapfrog before him at his signal, passing momentarily before him, in and out of the sunlight, he began again to count them off by name: Yates, Tusso, Swanson. . . . The BAR did not even jar in his hands, so short was the burst. He caught Waggoner in midstride, his legs apart and not touching the earth, like a dancer, though he already lay inert, face down and his rifle ten feet away, when the next man came by. When it was the sergeant's turn, he did not so much as glance at the body.

When he saw the captain next the Germans held only the church and the two story stucco building adjoining it. They crouched behind the broken wall of a building, in the shade, while up and down the street sporadic fighting continued, preparatory to a final assault. The captain's collar was open and he was sweating, though the morning air was still cool. The sergeant was as neat and composed as if he had awakened and dressed not two minutes before, except for some dust on his boots.

"How did it go?" the captain asked, looking past the wall to where the church stood, less than two hundred yards away.

The sergeant told him.

"One man?" the captain said. "Who was it?"

The sergeant spoke without an instant's hesitation. "Waggoner," he said. His face was empty, calm, unblinking.

The captain turned and looked at him. He straightened away from the wall and turned slowly and stared for a full moment at the sergeant while there grew and grew in his spent and anguished face an expression first of disbelief and then of shock and at last one of actual horror. "Waggoner?" he said. "Waggoner?" He was shouting, his voice hoarse and cracked like an old man's. "You mean you can stand there and tell me with a straight face that you ran into a sniper and the one man he got out of all of them was the very man you have been trying to get killed for the past two months? Is that what you're trying to tell me?" he cried. "Is that it?"

MY FATHER AND THE COSSACKS

MY FATHER IS an old man, and proud. Even today he walks upright, with the stride of an old soldier. When we were children we used to hear stories how in the old country even the Cossacks were wary of him. He was never a massive man, but square, with unflinching eyes and a square, peremptory face like that of an old patriarch. Family legend has it that once during a pogrom he came out on the dirt street of his village and withstood the charge of four mounted Cossacks, seizing—one after the other—their whips as they rode down upon him and flailed at him, and dragged them from their horses. I don't to this day know if the story is just apocryphal, or if it's true. When I ask him about it he sits and looks quietly out at me from above the arch his hands make clasped over the head of his thick dark cane, and says nothing. Sometimes he will say, without irony or pride, so that I can tell nothing even from his answer: "So it has been said."

He lives alone. It's fourteen years since the last of us married and left the house, and eight since my mother died, and yet he remains in the cramped dark apartment in which all of us grew up and which we have gone beyond. The house is a tenement on the east side. Nearby they have leveled several blocks of such tenements and put up a city housing development; new

brick walls rising above a configuration of green-bordered walks. It's the only green in the neighborhood. My father sits on the front stoop and looks out at the intersticed swards, the benches ranked beneath slender trees. "It is nice to live in such a house," he says. There is no longing or envy in his voice; it is a plain statement of fact.

"Well?" I say.

He says nothing. He knows what I mean. He sits quietly, erect, his hands folded upon the head of his cane as upon a sword hilt.

It's no use. For eight years now it's been no use. He won't move. We all have room for him, things have been all right for us. He could live out his years in comfort, without the outrage and affront which he must endure living in that bleak, decrepit house. When he first told us how there was no hot water, and often in the winter, no heat, we said; "You don't have to go on living here. To hell with this rathole."

"It is not so easy to find another place," he says. This was right after the war.

"Another place?" Harry says.

"In the new houses they charge so much," he says. He sits erect in his old chair, wearing a clean white shirt open at the collar.

Harry looks at me, then back at him. "What's the matter with living with one of us?" Harry says. "What are we—step-children?"

"Ah," he says, lifting one hand from the head of his cane in a deprecating motion. "To live with you."

Other times he is not that calm. That would be when he tells us about Mr Orezki. He tells us how he complains to Mr Orezki about the stench in the hallway and about the broken stairs,

and how Mr Orezki laughs in his face and says in a voice thin and vicious as a whip: "You don't like it here? Go take a room in the Waldorf." I can imagine him standing on the threshold to Mr Orezki's apartment, bending slightly upon his cane, registering his complaints courteously and without heat. But that would be at the beginning, before the viciousness and affront. Now he cannot even talk about it without heat. He sits there in the slow afternoon light, in the room smelling of old things, of things gone by, diminished into memory, and pounds his cane upon the floor. He is an old man, and yet along his forearms beneath the flesh the muscles are taut and hard as steel bands. "The building should fall on his head," he says of Mr Orezki.

But he says nothing of moving out. But he will. It's only a matter of time before he will see the futility of remaining there, of constantly demeaning himself in squabbles with Mr Orezki, and enduring the outrage that constant affront and living in such a house must engender within him. There is a limit to how much a man with his pride will stand. That's what I tell Harry and the others. "Don't worry about it," I say. "One fine day he'll just get fed up and move in with one of us. All we have to do is keep asking him to. Because he sure as hell isn't going to ask us." He wouldn't. He's too stiff for that, too unbending. Even with his own children.

But it hurts to see the way he is in the meantime. Twice, three times a month I see him. It's always the same. We sit in the same chairs each time, in the identical attitudes, the faint light beyond the window dissolving away, the street sounds fading along the rim of evening. He asks about Helen and the children, and then I ask how he has been. He does most of the talking. It's always one of two things. Either he talks about

the condition of the house, the dark rank hallway, the paucity of heat, or else he sits damning Mr Orezki. He does not complain. If I would just once give the impression that I thought he was complaining, he would never again say a word to me about it. That's the way he is, has always been.

"Forget it," I say when he has paused for a moment, still bent forward in an attitude which indicates he is not yet through. "It's not worth aggravating yourself over."

"Hah!" he says, looking me full in the face, his hands upon the cane. "It is easy for *you* to say. You do not have to hear his insults."

"You don't either," I say.

He straightens and sits looking at me. I go on quickly, since I have been thinking of it for some time. "Look," I say. "If you don't want to live with one of us—and I still don't know why—we can get you a different apartment some place, some nice place you can take pride in. Like that new project. With all his connections, Harry ought to be able to dig one up in no time." I do not pause until I have said it all. I know him well enough by now. If I pause for an instant he will begin to protest about the rent, that plaint unchanging and indivisible from what he conceives to be his dignity, his independence. So I say it without giving him a chance to break in. "And you don't have to worry about the rent. We'll take care of it. It's the least we can do for you."

But he sits quietly when I am through, an expression on his face something between a smile and a reproach. It is an expression I remember from childhood, when one of us had done or said something foolish. He says in a low voice, "It is not necessary to do anything for me."

"No," I say, not meaning to raise my voice. "Nothing's neces-

sary. Nothing at all. We want to do it. It'll give us a little pleasure. Do you mind if we have some pleasure?"

"You are good children," he says without looking at me, staring out across the room.

"You'll let us?" I say. I can already see the others' faces when I tell them he's finally decided to leave this hole, as I foretold he eventually would.

"I will manage," he says. "I have always managed."

He has. He came to America when he was twelve years old, with only sixteen cents in his pocket and the address of a third cousin his family had not heard from in three years. But he's an old man now. He's proved whatever he may have set out to prove. He's entitled to rest now, to cease. I try to tell him that. "You've done enough for us," I say. "Now let us do something for you."

He sits, not quite smiling, as though he knows something more than I do. "Do you think we like knowing what you have to put up with?" I ask.

That sets him off again. I should have known. Just the mere mention of the house, of Mr Orezki, is enough to do it, as though a button has been pushed. "He should burn in hell," he says of Mr Orezki, pounding his cane upon the floor.

Because it is no longer something as trivial as a dirty hallway, or the lack of heat. It is no longer even the way Mr Orezki insults some of the tenants, the women from whose husbands he knows he has nothing to fear. It takes a few weeks for me to find this out.

"He has said certain things to me," my father tells me in a level, constrained voice. It's when his voice is constrained that you really have to watch out; I remember that much from childhood. He sits stiffly, his back not touching the chair back.

Behind him on the far wall is his wedding picture, turning brown as old photographs do. It is the same face, only without the lines, the slack flesh. He stands in a tuxedo, an attire he has worn just four times afterward and then only at weddings too, at the side of my mother now buried eight years.

After a while it comes out. Mr. Orezki has begun to taunt him with living off his children. He has probably sensed that, because of his fierce pride, on this one subject my father is especially vulnerable. He is, because that's all I hear now, every time I come to see him. You would think that after all these years he would be secure in his pride, in the knowledge that if he has not proved to anyone else his ability to single-handedly meet and overcome whatever it is in a lifetime a man has to meet and overcome, he has at least proved it to himself. What he tells me is not in complaint, as though he wants me to help, to do something about it. He simply relates it, what Mr Orezki has said and what he has said in turn, in the same tone as that in which he told me about the broken stairs, the rank effluvia of the hallway, earlier. Only his outrage is more profound now.

I say nothing, letting him go on. I still haven't give up hope. I can be as stubborn as he. Maybe if he works himself up enough he will finally make a break. He will show some sense and move out, though no doubt he will think of it as a kind of capitulation. Maybe all it is is a question of waiting, and of saying the right thing at the right moment.

"They should cut pieces from him," he says in a bitter, level voice more ominous than his shouting. Sometimes he will lapse into the old tongue, the alien violent speech, while cursing Mr Orezki, as though it is closer to the blood, the heart. "He is a devil," he says. It is though he believes in the utter literalness

of what he is saying. "All he lives for is to torture people, to cause unhappiness."

It's not wholly true, what my father says of Mr Orezki. I often see Mr Orezki when I come to the house, at his bedroom window which looks out over the street, or in the hallway. He is a small man, a little hunched. He is always dressed in clothing that does not quite fit him, that is a little worn, as though it had been handed down to him by some rich relative. Yet they say he is rich himself, that he is miserly and owns at least five house that they do not know about in addition to the one that they do. They say he has enough money to buy everything a man could hope for, and have enough left over to do it again.

He is childless. He was married but his wife left him more than twenty-five years ago. No one knows why. There are guesses, though. Most of them are malicious, the kind told with a smirk, with derision. Sometimes my father repeats them, telling them with open satisfaction, since this is the sole revenge of which he can avail himself. Most of them have to do with sex, with impotence. Since the time his wife left him Mr Orezki has lived alone, in his squalid downstairs apartment untended by woman. Untended by anyone, to judge by what it looks like. Though there are cats. Once I counted five of them, in various corners of the kitchen. This is all he has towards the end of his life: a ramshackle building in which he is a stranger, and his cats.

I see him often at the window, a small forlorn figure staring out over the street. Maybe it's because he is alone like that, that he resents my father, watching us come to visit him with undeviating regularity; the children now grown and pros-

perous, in whom devotion has not flagged, stepping out of new cars.

"That is still no excuse to treat people like he does," my father says.

"No," I say. "I didn't say it was."

"So? Then what are you telling me?"

"Just don't take what he says so seriously, that's all. Take it from whom it comes."

"That is easy for you to say," he says, lifting one hand from the cane.

"But where will it get you?" I say. "You'll only get yourself aggravated. And for what?"

He sits looking out at the far wall, not answering immediately. "All my life I have tried to do what is right," he says quietly, to himself, as though he hasn't even heard what I have just said. "I ask only to be treated the same way. It is not too much to ask."

And yet maybe it is. "Not everyone is like you," I say. "You should know that by now."

He looks at me, gripping the cane, his fists white at the knuckles. "I do not have to listen to his insults," he says, raising his voice. "You think I should let him make dirt of me?"

He does not expect an answer, since of the two that are possible one he would deride and the other he doesn't have to hear from me. He sits bent forward, regarding me out of a face as motionless as stone. You cannot blame him, the way he feels, the outrage. All he has to sustain him are his pride and self-respect, the old independent blood that will not flag.

"No," I say. "I don't mean that."

But he is back on Mr Orezki again. "Some day he will say one word too many to me," he says fiercely.

So I have no reason to be surprised. There are things that

grow and take shape before our very eyes and we don't see, don't know. When my wife calls one afternoon to tell me the police have phoned about my father, and they would like to see me, my sole feeling is one of astonishment. But I go immediately. Generally it takes me twenty minutes to get to my father's house from the shop. This time it takes me thirty-five. That's the way it always is. If you don't particularly care, everything goes smoothly. It's when you're in a hurry and every second counts that trains pull out on you, or you can't find an empty cab.

Finally, I manage to find one. The precinct station is only two blocks from my father's house. My wife has not actually told me, but I assume this is the one she means, the one that called. I go quickly up the front stairs and up to the desk. I have been in the ribbon business for twelve years and all that time I have dealt continuously with the police, buying tickets for benefits to which I have never gone, obtaining permits, managing the discreet dispensations without which there can be no amicability. But this is the first time I have been inside a station house. I go up to the high, center desk behind which a policeman stands, scanning some papers. A sergeant. It's not that I am not anxious or worried. But I wait for him to get through, to look up of his own volition and at his own time. Perhaps it is because I wish to hold off the truth those infinitesimal moments longer, though I do not yet know what the truth is.

When he looks up, I say in a quiet voice, "I'm George Karpov. You have my father here."

He looks at me with what seems to be no expression at all in his face. He's probably seen so many like me, he has ceased counting. "Oh," he says. "So you're the old man's son."

"Yes," I say. "I'm his son."

It takes but a few moments for him to tell it. It seems there was another argument, such as those my father has been telling me about for the past six months. I can see them on the stair landing, Mr Orezki and my father, the old faces close against each other, unceasing and bitter, their voices raised. Except that this time there was more heat to it. Or maybe it was just that it has been going on for so long and this was the last straw. That's what some of the tenants said, those who witnessed it. Because in the end, when Mr Orezki said something about my father living off his children, my father without a sound raised his cane and struck at Mr Orezki, who fell backward against the wall and lay without moving. He was already dead when the ambulance came, bleeding slightly from the ear.

"Can I see him now?" I ask the sergeant.

"Sure," he says. "He's upstairs."

I follow a patrolman upstairs to the large room the detectives use as an office. They must see everything here, those things only a fraction of which get into the papers and which do not serve to raise your estimation of the human race. But it is a hard life. I am breathing hard when we come to the top of the stairs. I am not exactly middleaged, but I'm no longer twenty either. The office is a large room, with sunlight streaming in from a row of windows on one side. There are a number of desks placed perpendicularly to the wall, at which men who do not look up sit or stand. When we come into the office I begin immediately to scan the room from over the patrolman's shoulder, as he is still directly before me. I know what my father will look like, the way he will be sitting.

I see him before the patrolman does. He is sitting at the far side of the room, on a chair placed against the wall. He sits erect, motionless and composed, as though he were in his

own living room. I go to him. I stand before him in the sunlight, the swirling motes.

"Papa," I say. He is not a man devoid of pity. But all his life he has demanded justness of other men, since it is what he has demanded of himself. I have no doubts. If he had that moment in the hallway to live over, he would do exactly the same thing.

He looks up, an old man in a clean shirt frayed at the collar, his hands folded upon his cane. He is only human. There is just so much you can expect mere flesh and blood to bear. Yet I think of Mr Orezki, the hunched lonely figure at the window, the apartment filled with cats.

"Papa," I say. "What have you done?"

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HE SAW THE diner while it was yet a good distance away, set boxlike beside the highway upon the harsh open land. "Thank God," he said. He spoke to himself, the car filled only with the cartons of stock for which there was no room in the trunk. At the beginning of each trip he had to pile the extra stock on the floor and on the back seat almost up to the windows, through which could be read the names of the various drugs the cartons held. He had been driving for four hours without pause. He was hungry. He had been hungry for the past hour but there had been no suitable place at which to eat, no town or city large enough. Now he could wait no longer. "I'll get something at the next joint I come to, the heck with what it looks like," he had promised himself. Then he had seen the diner. The land fled past, the rock-studded earth, the scrub flattened by wind, shriveled by violent sun. Way off in the distance, as ominous as mounting clouds, a line of mountains stood darkly along the horizon.

It took him a full five minutes to reach the diner after he first saw it. Adjacent to the diner stood a filling station, also boxlike, also with a quality transitory and inconsequential. Before the diner stood two cars, a new and an old, and a trailer truck. The truck was parked broadside to the sun, casting an

immense shadow. He turned off the engine and got out of the car, already thinking of what he would eat. It was Thursday. Thursday at home his wife prepared dinners he particularly liked; trout, ham steak, fried chicken. He thought of that, of himself sitting at his own table with his family, of the sunlight across the table. Ahh, he thought.

But he ordered only a hamburger and coffee. That'll have to do, he thought. He thought of all the times he had gotten indigestion from meals eaten at roadside diners. He went to the washroom, past the strong odor of frying which blew hot and close from the small kitchen in back. He washed his hands and face, studying himself for a moment in the small mirror above the sink. He was a man in his early fifties, with the flaccid waistline of a sedentary man; he had the sallow urban complexion of a bookkeeper. Actually he had been a furrier. When he had become ill five years ago his doctor had advised him to live in Arizona. He lived now in Salt Lake City, still with the urban cast of the east, still a stranger among mountains, among scrub and desert.

His food was already at his place when he returned. Before he began to eat he removed his hat in a grave, formal gesture and placed it on the seat beside him. The diner was almost empty. It was now all over that way, now that the season was past and it was the second week in September. In a matter of weeks winter would fasten upon the land, the fierce snows and iron cold. He ate slowly, in the meantime glancing around at those who had been there before him. In one booth sat a well-dressed man and woman, and a man in a worn cloth jacket in another. The truckdriver sat at the counter, picking his teeth and reading a newspaper from over the clutter of his soiled dishes. The salesman noticed the boy last, seated alone in a

corner booth, the table empty before him, staring out the window, his eyes squinted against the fierce, late afternoon sun.

The truckdriver was the first to leave. He paid his check and said to the boy on his way out, "Good Luck, kid." The boy made no acknowledgment, seated with his face against the window, staring out at the highway along which few cars came now though in summer, traffic ran in a long constant file like a procession of ants, up into the distant mountains. What surprised the salesman most about the boy was his age. He is just a kid, the salesman thought. He sat half-turned upon his stool, chewing slowly, his coffee in one hand. He thought, Imagine a kid like that being out here alone. Outside the truck's starting shattered the silence; its engine throbbed within the afternoon's sunny void and through the window the salesman saw its shadow lift from across the lot. Presently the throbbing began to diminish, then it died away.

By then the salesman had turned back to the counter, though he continued to think about the boy. He knew what it was that troubled him. By nature he was a domestic man, and his oldest son was about the same age as the boy. He sat straight upon the backless seat, almost formal in his suit and tie, finishing his meager and disappointing food. But he could put into words what he felt: A boy that age has no business out here by himself, he ought to be at home playing with friends or doing something around the house.

He was turned to the counter when the man and woman rose and left, and so he did not see the woman. There only blew by the strong, sweet gust of perfume when she passed, fading quickly upon the thin air. So he did not know at first hand that the woman was particularly attractive. Nor would he have cared. But no sooner had she left the diner than the counterman

began to comment upon her, speaking in the slow, lewd tones heard among men in hotel lobbies, on street corners. When the counterman stopped talking all at once, the salesman looked up to see him watching beyond the window. The salesman turned and watched too: the new car in the lot had been a Chrysler and the salesman saw it back smoothly away from the diner and make a wide arc onto the highway, glinting and glaring the sunlight from its roof.

When the car was gone the counterman said, "Boy, you could really enjoy life with a babe like that, traveling around, stopping at all those fancy hotels. All it takes is a fat bankroll." He spoke to the man in the cloth jacket, who made a rejoinder. There was no longer in the air the small undercurrent of eating sounds, the tremor of silver upon dishware, upon silver. Across the sunny emptiness of late afternoon their voices came in clear, measured tones. They spoke generally of new cars and women and of making money. But in their voices was the inveterate cynicism of men who feel they have not had their share of the emoluments of life.

"No sir. Putting in a day's work for a day's pay is no way to make money," the counterman said.

"You can say that again."

"You spend your life working hard and not doing anything dishonest, and what've you got to show for it?"

"You mean you ain't got a new Chrysler back there in the shed?"

"Sure I have," the counterman said. "Hell, ain't honesty the best policy?"

The counterman was a small, lean man, with the knotted aspect of a tree root. He wore a soiled apron about his waist. In his eyes burned a fierce, convinced light, almost prophet-

like. When the man in the cloth jacket rose and went to the cash register to pay his check, the counterman bent across the counter and spoke suddenly to him, his voice swift and passionate with resentment. "I am forty-three years old," he said, "and I have never taken a cent that didn't belong to me or that I didn't have to work for. And all I have to show for it is a beatup Chevvy and ninety dollars in the bank while there are those who ride around in Cadillacs and smoke dollar cigars. And I know how they do it too. There ain't a man worth money who hasn't done his share of shady dealing, I don't care what he does for a living. Lawyers, doctors, congressmen. All of them, the ones who talk polite and wear white shirts and get their pictures in the paper. So why the hell should a man worry about being honest and doing the right thing when all around there are those who are working every dirty trick under the sun and getting rich at it? You tell me."

The man in the cloth jacket could not, and when he left the counterman came to where the salesman sat, a residue of bitterness in his face. In one hand he carried a rag which he used to wipe the counter. "It's dog eat dog today," he said abruptly, harshly. His voice was deep, as though it should have come from a man bigger than he. "Nobody gives a damn for nobody else."

He mentioned the boy in the corner booth as a case in point.

"You mean he's been here trying to get a lift since yesterday morning?" the salesman said.

"That's right," the counterman said. "And no dough. He ain't got a red cent." He began to remove the truckdriver's soiled dishes which still remained upon the counter, and placed them with a good deal of motion and noise in the small sink behind the counter.

"What did he do during the night?" the salesman said.

The counterman looked at him. "What do you mean, what did he do?"

"I mean, where did he sleep? It gets awful cold, nights."

The counterman clattered some dishes. "How the hell do I know?" he said. He glared at the salesman.

"Didn't you have a place where you could put him up? Any place?" the salesman said.

"Put him up?" the counterman said. "You think I'm crazy? I don't know him from a hole in the wall."

For a moment the salesman looked at the other in astonishment. At the far end of the diner the boy sat motionless, bent into the window. He did not appear to hear what was being said. "You didn't let him stay out there all night, did you? Out in the cold?"

"I didn't let him anything," the counterman said harshly. "I didn't ask him out here. He didn't get any invitations from me."

"Yes. But you must have a shed he could have slept in. Or inside here."

The counterman ceased among the dishes. "What do you mean, inside here? I don't know who the hell he is or where he comes from. You think I'm looking to get my throat cut? I read the papers. I could get up the next morning and find the whole place gone. If I'm lucky enough to get up."

"But to let him spend the ——."

"Listen here," the counterman said angrily. "I'm as sorry for him as you are but I don't see why the hell it's up to me to feed and bed him just because some of those bastards are too ——."

"Of course. Feed," the salesman said.

"Yeah. Feed," the counterman said. He came away from the

sink, wiping his hands on his apron. "I let him have a sandwich and coffee yesterday, too."

"Yesterday?" the salesman said.

"What the hell do you expect?" the counterman said. "Free meals too? This ain't the Salvation Army."

For a moment the salesman did no more than sit and look at the other. Then he expelled his breath slowly and deeply. "When did the boy eat last?" he asked quietly.

"I let him have coffee and a doughnut this morning," the counterman said.

"And he hasn't eaten since?"

"How the hell should I know?" the counterman said. He ceased. "Say, who the hell do you think ——?"

"I want a steak dinner for the boy," the salesman said. When the counterman didn't move he said, "Don't worry. I'm paying for it." Then he got off the stool and went to the boy.

The first thing the salesman remarked about the boy was that he appeared younger than he had thought. Why, he can't be more than sixteen, he said to himself upon getting his first close look at him. This was even younger than his son, and for a moment he thought of his son in such a situation, in such a place. This only increased his outrage at the counterman. The boy was dressed in a clean workshirt and clean, faded jeans. A thin cloth jacket was folded neatly over the seatback. Beside him, on the floor, was a cheap canvas suitcase, such as servicemen used at one time. The suitcase alone was not immaculate; the handle and the leather edging were frayed, the canvas blotched.

The boy was from Nebraska.

"You're a long way from home," the salesman said.

"Yes sir," the boy said. He spoke in a polite, quiet voice, a

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little nasal. He was slender, almost handsome in a weak, unmatured way. His eyes were a pale blue. All the while he spoke he glanced continually out at the highway, his eyes shifting from the salesman to the window and back again. "I'm hoping to be able to get to San Francisco."

"I know," the salesman said. "I heard. You know someone there?"

"I've got a cousin lives there," the boy said.

"What do your parents say to your traveling around like this, all by yourself?" the salesman said.

The boy's glance shifted; it seemed to the salesman his eyes moved instantly, with the suddenness of small fish changing course. But his face didn't change. "They don't care," he said quietly.

"Don't care?" the salesman said.

"Well, Ma's dead," the boy said talking into the window, not looking at the salesman, intent upon the highway, the land treeless and desolate stretching away to the horizon. "Pa's always drunk or he's in town. He don't care."

The salesman could think of nothing to say. The counterman brought the food and set it before the boy who glanced once at it and then up at the counterman and said, "But I ——."

"It's all right," the salesman said, putting his hand lightly upon the boy's arm. "It's my treat. I've got a boy your age. I wouldn't want him to go hungry if he was alone."

The boy ate in silence. He ate without hurrying, steadily and methodically and with even something of decorum, while the salesman looked on in surprise. It's as if he hasn't even missed a meal, the salesman thought. But the boy finished everything, leaving nothing in his plate. When the boy paused between courses the salesman told him that he was going west for a

hundred miles or so. "It's not very far, but at least you won't have to spend another night out here," he said.

When the boy finished they left. He paid both checks. The boy waited for him at the door, wearing his jacket now, the suitcase in one hand. Waiting at the cash register for his change, the salesman did not speak to the counterman, turning upon him a countenance remote and cold, thinking of what the other had said, of the boy spending the night outside. At that moment he would have believed of the counterman the most heinous of crimes. They left the diner, the boy a step behind, hurrying awkwardly to keep up while the suitcase bumped his legs. Sitting behind the wheel while the boy got into the car and arranged the suitcase on the floor before him, the salesman contemplated the diner, shaking his head and saying, "Some people," over and over. When the boy was settled at last, he started the car and drove it on to the highway, into the west.

For a while he drove in silence. As he had spoken of the counterman, so might he have of the boy's father himself. He thought that, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the boy, the thin slumped figure within the neat clothing, the profile upon which sunlight glared; childlike and fixed directly ahead as if in contemplation of its own solitariness. Yes, he thought. He must be something too. To let a kid run around like that, all alone. He drove holding the wheel with both hands, steadying the car against a wind which had begun to blow out of the north. He drove slowly, warily. Even so the car continued to weave and sway. In the distance tall curtains of dust rose from among the scrub and trailed themselves over the land, spreading over the sky. From over the mountains the sun threw a deepening, orange light. He slowed the car even more, the

taste of dust suddenly upon his tongue. He was afraid of having an accident. After five years of crossing desert and mountain, traveling from city to distant city, he still felt a vague distrust, fear even, of the land about him; that expanse beginning at the road's edge and extending as far as eye could see, upon which no lights shone, no human moved. In the car, in motion along the highway, he felt safe enough, as remote from the land as in an airplane. His great dread was that one day the car would break down, stranding him within that expanse, remote from town or habitation.

When the wind lessened at sunset, he felt relieved. The land had begun to rise toward the mountains which now loomed before them. They spoke little, though from time to time the salesman tried to draw the boy out, making tentative beginnings with such subjects as his own boyhood, the west, the baseball pennant race. But the boy did not respond. He spoke in single words or not at all, sitting there looking neither right nor left, his suitcase between his legs; uncommunicative, bemused. The highway now ran directly at the mountain before them, stark against the fading light, so that it seemed that if they continued on they must crash into it. But the salesman knew that some distance ahead the highway forked, a narrow road ascending abruptly while the broader lane turned and skirted the mountain's periphery for a distance, to rise ultimately in gentle spirals.

"It kind of worries you the first time," the salesman said. "It looks like it's a dead end."

The boy said nothing.

"The old highway goes straight up," the salesman said. "But no one uses it now, except if you're going hunting or camping up there. All the through traffic uses the new highway."

Silent, the boy looked straight ahead, though after a moment

he bent and rummaged briefly in his suitcase. The salesman leaned forward and peered over the wheel out into the dying light, watching for the signpost which marked the fork. The boy must have been watching for it too because the instant it appeared he said, "Take the one on the right."

"No, that's the wrong one," the salesman said. "I told you. That's the one that goes straight up."

"That's right," the boy said, and his voice had a flat, peremptory quality now which had not been there before. "That's the one I want you to take."

Surprised at the boy's presumption, the salesman turned and looked at the boy and saw, in turn, the boy looking intently at him. The boy sat half turned in his seat, his right hand extended and balanced on his thigh, and the salesman saw in the wan evening light the glint of the curved surfaces of the revolver the boy held.

He was so astonished at what he saw, he took his hands from the wheel. At once the car began to slant across the highway into the oncoming lane, only to be snared back by the boy who without hesitation reached over and caught and held the wheel with his free hand. "Stop the car," he commanded.

The salesman did so, not taking his eyes from the boy. He still did not believe what was happening, even when, still holding the revolver on him, the boy reached down and heaved the suitcase out of his way, into the back seat atop the cartons of drugs which tumbled and tinkled under its weight; as if of all the things that he had conjectured could possibly happen to him, this was the last. "Don't look so surprised," the boy said in a hard, faintly scornful voice. "Didn't you ever see a gun before?"

The salesman had not, not at such close range and directed so at him. In his disbelief he had not yet begun to realize the

threat implicit in the leveled gun, the boy. It was suddenly full dark. From out of the desert the wind blew upon the car. Above the mountains clusters of stars glittered and winked, in their pallid light the car motionless upon the highway, the highway motionless, stretching invisibly away. The salesman could barely see the boy now, though his presence was unmistakable. In the darkness the salesman could hear only his own breathing.

"All right," the boy said. "Now drive. And take the road on the right."

The salesman did as he was told. Beyond the signpost the old highway began its immediate ascent, the car advancing against the sheer obliquity of the mountain face, its engine laboring. He drove for almost a full minute before he realized that his headlights were not turned on. It was as though the boy could see him as clearly as in daylight: when he reached toward the dash the boy said immediately, "Leave that. No lights."

"But —," he said. Then it was as if *he* could see the other. His voice trailed off: at his side the boy made no sound, no move. He drove slowly, peering into the darkness he could not penetrate, along a road he couldn't see. It was when he became aware that they had seen no other cars for some time now that he realized the full ominousness of his situation. My God, we're all alone up here, he thought; and as if in reflex to his thinking he looked frantically into the rear view mirror and out at both sides of the road. But there were no lights, no sound except that of the wind and the car's laboring. All at once he became terrified.

"Listen," he said, turning to the boy. "I don't know what you want. I don't have much money and that stuff in back isn't

worth anything to you. But you're welcome to it. You take all of it. The money, the car. Everything. Only let's go back. Let's go down to the highway." All the while he spoke his voice had been getting thinner, higher; desperate and abased with fear. Had he listened to it, he would not have recognized it as his own. When the boy made no reply he cried, "For God's sake, have a heart. I've got a wife and kids. I've got a boy your age."

"I know," the boy said quietly. But he did not move, the gun did not waver. "Now just keep your eyes on the road."

The car had slanted again into the other lane of the road, which the salesman could see more plainly now that the moon had risen. In the moonlight the road lay like a silver thread. Above wheeled the constellations which, on cloudless nights, he and his son would sometimes stroll beneath and name, each in its particular place. He thought of his son, his wife, of what they were doing at that very moment, oblivious of his peril. My God, he thought. My God, my God, my God. He was unaware that his breathing was now coming more rapidly, deeply, and when his voice began in the darkness, with the drawn out and syllableless quality of a moan, he had as little control over it as the boy. He sat forlorn as a child. "Please," he said, slumped upon the wheel and looking in no direction in particular, his face sweating, his eyes imploring and wide. "Please, please, please."

"Just take it easy," the boy said quietly. His voice was not unkind, almost gentle. "Take it easy and watch the road."

Gradually the salesman calmed. For ten minutes they rode in silence, during which time the salesman told himself over and over, Now take it easy. You're not going to do yourself any good by getting upset. Try thinking of something, he told himself. Think of something else. So he thought of how he

would put up the shelves in the foyer closet which he had promised his wife, and this brought to mind his son who had offered to help and his son reminded him again of the boy. He thought of the boy, of how easily he had been taken in. He must be laughing up his sleeve all right, he thought. He began to get angry at himself. "Damn fool," he said. He still spoke to himself, but audibly now, so that he almost started at the sudden sound of his own voice. But he did not stop. "That's what I am. To fall for something like that. Talk about suckers and having something put over on you. I ought to have my head examined."

He had straightened and he sat erect now, his hat awry upon his head, glaring past the windshield. The road was now plainly visible for some distance ahead. The moon had mounted higher into the sky; it shone upon the mountains, the road, the increasing tree and brake.

"What?" the boy said.

"Yes," the salesman said, becoming angrier the more he thought of it. "You. Talk about playing someone for a sucker. With that cock and bull story about how your old man's a drunk and your mother dead and you haven't a cent. I'll bet the reason you can't carry that suitcase is it's so full of dough from holding up suckers like me."

"That's not true," the boy said quietly.

"No? You mean it's only half full of dough? The other half's rings and watches and things?"

"It's no cock and bull story," the boy said in an even, dogged voice. "I'm no liar."

"No," the salesman said immediately, harshly. "You are everything but." Though an instant later he asked incredulously, "You mean to sit there and tell me it's the truth, about your father and mother?"

"I said so, didn't I?" the boy said.

"Then what are you doing pulling a gun on people?" the salesman said.

"What's that got to with it?" the boy said.

The salesman could not say at once. Yet at the back of his mind was the belief it was indivisible from the injustice he felt was being perpetrated against him and as the car leveled over the crest toward which it had been laboring and from which it would then descend into the valley beyond, he saw clearly that he had precipitated by his own actions the disaster he was now attempting to circumvent. Sure, he thought. I had to be a big sport. I had to be sorry for him. I couldn't leave him there in the diner. Therefore when he spoke to the boy it was in a voice paradoxical with despair at what he had done, and hope in the boy's gratefulness for it. "That's a fine thing," he said. "Here I try to treat you decent and this is what I get for it."

Then he looked at the boy. And though the expression upon the boy's face altered, it was not one of gratitude. The salesman could not tell what it was. Between them the revolver glinted in the moonlight; leveled, unmoving, as though independent of them both. The boy leaned over the revolver toward him. "Nobody told you to," he said quietly.

"Nobody ——? Nobody ——?" The salesman broke off, so full of astonishment he could not speak. Whatever rejoinder he had expected, it had not been this. "You mean you'd have liked it better if I left you back there to freeze outside and get pneumonia and not have anything to eat?" he said. "That would have been better?"

"I didn't say that," the boy said.

"Then what *did* you say?" the salesman said, and he was almost shouting. They were upon the crest now and on either

side the land fell gently away from the road, to loom ghost-like in crest beyond crest in the distance.

"Mister," the boy said. "If you want to play good Samaritan, that's your business. I didn't ask you."

"Didn't you ever hear of such a thing as kindness?" the salesman cried, so worked up he forgot about the revolver and turned full upon the boy, glaring angrily. "Didn't you ever hear of helping someone out?"

The car had once more slanted into the oncoming lane but this time the boy did not tell him; neither of them was even aware of it. They were looking at each other. They sat but two feet apart yet it was as though they looked at one another from two separate worlds, planets; the broad, slack face of the salesman too astonished to be even desperate, and the boy's almost calm, almost cold countenance. For a moment they were both silent, while about them the distant crests moved in slow, ghostly retrograde, though as the car tilted forward on the start of its slow descent into the valley the boy spoke in a voice as abrupt and flat as pistol shots. "Mister," he said. "You are a grown man and if you are fool enough to want to inconvenience yourself and deprive yourself for someone you haven't ever laid eyes on before, and with nothing in it for you, I ain't going to stop you." And before the salesman could make a rejoinder the boy said with no change at all in the tone or inflection of his voice: "Now just put on your lights and drive slow."

Out of sheer surprise the salesman obeyed immediately. For a moment he could not understand what had prompted the boy to change his mind about the lights. But when they came to an area beside the road which they could see in the pale glare of the headlights was level and fairly clear of scrub and

brake, and the boy said quietly, "Now just take her off the road gentle like and stop her over there"; he knew at once.

He knew at once and as surely as if he had been told, that the boy was now going to kill him. I am dead, he thought. He began to breathe heavily, his heart thudding. And though his first impulse was to cry out and slump upon the wheel in despair, he continued to sit erect, looking straight ahead and guiding the car carefully off the road. The car jounced as they came over the shoulder and into the clearing; the headlights wavered, shooting off into the air, dwindling in the ultimate darkness beyond.

He contemplated his murder in disbelief, imagining his body inert and crumpled like a sack, thrown hugger-mugger into the scrub, upon the bare earth, to rot unseen beneath the stars, the fierce sun. He had always believed he would die in bed, in his own home, venerable, surrounded by his family; as though death were gentle as sleep. He succumbed to regret, and with the fury and despair born of it he thought how easily he could have circumvented this moment at the start. *All I had to do* he thought. *All I had*

He ceased. Because even then he knew he could not have turned his back upon the boy. Without putting it into words he was aware that had he that moment in the diner to live over again, he would not have acted otherwise. Had he put it into words he would have thought: Because there is a price you have to pay even for being good. As it was all he thought was, God, God, God. He breathed heavily, deeply, as though there were no longer air for his lungs, his blood. Yet even then he plotted one last desperate essay at escape, as he brought the car to a halt, the boxes in back shifting and bumping. So pre-

occupied was he with plotting, he didn't hear the boy until he spoke a second time. "Cut the lights, damn it," the boy said.

He did not look at the boy. He bent toward the dash and fumbled for the switch, determined to spring upon the boy in that instant between light and dark, before sight is fully adjusted to either. But in this too the boy seemed to have anticipated him, to have at the outset assessed his advantage and then fully used it, as he had at the very beginning back there at the diner. When the salesman turned upon him in the instant of full dark, moving with surprising quickness for a man of his age and bulk, the boy immediately fired three shots into him.

The gun made a terrible noise inside the close confines of the car. The salesman halted in mid-spring, in an attitude which might be construed as one of simple surprise, his hat tumbling slowly from him, the sudden harsh sound of his breathing filling the car. Yet even as his life spurted from him, out over the wheel and the seat and upon his clothing, he glared upon the boy, devoid of fear, full of terrible and scathing contempt.

IN THIS WORLD

WHEN I GOT BACK to the office late in the afternoon after running around all day seeing buyers and talking myself blue in the face being nice to them and telling them what a good Fall line we had this year, they were already at it. If it was anyone else they'd just call up the union and it would be over in five minutes. But no, they had to stand there and argue with him trying to get him to be reasonable and he just sitting there looking right back at them and shaking his head so that when I came in they all jumped on me at once. That's what you get for working in the same place as your father.

It took me a while to get what it was all about, they were all talking at the same time. Mr Feldman and Zucker and the shop chairman and even the old man put his two cents in but no one was listening to him. I could see Mr Feldman was sore, walking fast up and back before his desk and the blood full in his face as though he were about to explode, the way he was at sales meetings when things weren't moving fast enough. Finally he got the others quiet.

"You better take him home and talk to him, kid," he said. "I'm beginning to lose my patience."

"I will, Mr Feldman," I said. "Don't worry about a thing."

"You better make him understand this isn't a philanthropy or an old man's rest home," he said.

"I will," I said.

"I wouldn't take all this trouble if he wasn't your father. You know that," he said.

"I appreciate it, Mr Feldman," I said. "I'll straighten it all out."

Then I got Pa out of there as fast as I could. He wanted to say something more but I was in enough hot water and I got him out of the office and into the hall where the elevators were. I was going to tell him what was on my mind but just about then the old man came out. He has got to have his nose in everything. Some day I will tell him that, I don't care if he is Mr Feldman's father. You would never believe he started the business and built it from the ground up and it bears his name, to look at him. An old man like that. He may have been something once but sometimes I think he is not quite right in the head, coming early in the morning to the shop to stand there greeting each one of them as they come in to work, telling them good morning and asking how they feel and about their families and doing little favors for them as though he were head doorman and family counselor and Household Finance all rolled into one. One good thing. He had sense enough to turn the business over to Mr Feldman and his son-in-law, or else we'd all be out in the streets.

He stood there for a minute as though he couldn't make up his mind if he should come over or not but I didn't look at him. He wasn't going to get any invitations from me. I have had enough of him, cornering me in the john that time right after I was hired and telling me how I was still young and I should not waste my life running after things that do not matter and that all that matters are love and helping your fellow man and I thought I'd like to help all right, I'd like to help myself to

some of what it is that makes the wheels turn. I thought how it was all right for him to talk, he had a house up in Riverdale and an Olds 98 and summers he went up to the country and if he got that for being a boy scout I was going to run out quick and lead across the street the first dozen blind people I could find. But I didn't say that. I told him I felt that way too but a man has to live and that this was not the appropriate place to discuss a subject of such a nature, standing there with our flies open and toilets flushing all around us, but that didn't seem to bother him. I suppose he has gotten so he will talk about it any place at all but I didn't look up at him and I could see out of the corner of my eye he stood there watching Pa and me with that sorry expression on his face as though he pitied all mankind and which I have seen him look at his own son with, and then he just shook his head and went back inside. I was glad of that. I was in that kind of a mood where I would have told him what I really thought of him, and where would that get me? I have worked too hard to get where I am, to want to jeopardize it by shooting off my mouth.

But leave it to my father. When we got out of the elevator I said, "You know Mr Feldman doesn't like to be talked to like that."

"Mr. Feldman?" Pa said.

"Now don't start that again," I said.

"Is it a lie?" Pa said.

"He's a big man in the line, even if you did know him when he was a kid and you carried him around on your shoulders," I said. "You know time marches on, Pa."

"I know, I know," he said.

He doesn't act it though. Maybe he hasn't taken a good look in the mirror lately. Bent like that and grey and when he is

excited his hands tremble. The least he could do is stop wearing that shabby hat and suit which he has had for ten years at least and inside of which he has aged and shriveled so that now it is two sizes too large and he would not look any worse wearing a sack. We came out of the building into the sun.

"What?" he said.

"Why all the fuss about changing your machine?" I said.

"You too?" he said.

"I'm just asking," I said. "Can't we even discuss it?"

"There is nothing to discuss," Pa said.

"There must have been something, to judge by what was going on in that office," I said.

"Nothing was going on," he said.

"No. You and Mr Feldman were just exercising your vocal cords, yelling like that," I said.

Pa was quiet for a minute. We crossed Seventh Avenue. The garage was just up the block. "Thirty years," Pa said.

"What's that?" I said.

"A lifetime," he said. "Before you were born." He looked at me. He looked as if he would begin to cry any minute. That was all I needed, standing there out on the street with him crying and God knows who coming along.

"One sewing machine's as good as another, Pa," I said.

That brought him up. He stopped and turned on me. Stopped right in the middle of the sidewalk. "I should have to sit in the corner where the fan blows on me in the summer and the radiator burns in the winter?" he said in a raised voice. "After thirty years?"

Some of those going by turned and looked at him. "All right, Pa," I said.

"Well?" he said, standing there in the middle of the sidewalk, in the shapeless hat, the old oversized suit, his eyes glaring.

"You're absolutely right," I said, trying to get him moving again. My mistake was in thinking he had calmed down and I could talk to him about it. Some of them were just standing there now, looking on. You would think they'd have enough decency not to just stand there and gape right out in the open like that. But they don't. Maybe they think the street's a circus or something, standing and staring as though they have paid their money and they are seated and where's the show. They don't care who they embarrass and maybe one of my accounts strolling down the street just then, on top of it. That would be all I'd need.

"Everybody's looking at us," I said.

"So?" he said. "So? Let them look."

But I finally got him moving, with them standing there looking after us and we finally got to the garage and I gave him the ticket with one hand while I went on shushing Pa with the other, so to speak. This was one place I didn't want him to get started in. That would be a hot one. Parking my car here just so I can be seen and speak to some of the big wheels from the firms around here, and they would pick to come in the one time he is with me and creating a scene. I would have left him at the shop and gone for the car myself, had I known he would carry on so. And all because they changed his seat. It isn't even that the sewing machine is worse. It is simply that he has been with the firm for thirty years and he knew Mr Feldman when he was a child and he must have that machine as if it were his inalienable right and privilege. Well, father or no father, all I can say is that would be one hell of a way to run a business if a man could not tell the people he is paying and whom he is providing with a means of livelihood, which seat to take, no matter how long they have been there.

After about a year and a half they brought my car around. If it had been a Cadillac they'd have had it out here fast enough. They didn't even bother to clean the windshield, and they about a dollar higher than any of the other parking places around here, as though they think a man should feel it a privilege to have his car taken by them and a dollar extra is a small price to pay for it. Well, that's all right with me, too. I will have that Cadillac one day, and I'll bring it down here just to watch them hop. I'll have them yes sirring me until they are blue in the face. I paid him and gave him something extra as a tip. Some day I'll just ask him what he does for it. We got into the car.

"Is it all right now?" Pa said.

"Is what all right?" I said.

"Can I speak now? Can I say now what is in my heart and you should not be ashamed?" he said.

"What are you talking about, Pa?" I said.

"Nothing," he said. "I am talking about nothing."

"I just didn't want everyone standing and staring at you," I said.

"I understand," he said.

"How do you think I feel, seeing everyone staring at my father as if he was a crazy man or something," I said. "Even if you don't have any sense of shame, I do," I said.

He didn't say anything, looking away, staring out the window. I drove down Thirty-Sixth Street to the East Side Drive. I must have said something wrong. I can't help it if he's so sensitive. Lately you can't tell him a thing.

And then he tells me a thing like: "Is that why you do not come into the shop to see me?" Just like that. Out of nowhere.

"What are you talking about now?" I said.

"Why you do not come into the shop to see me," he said. "Is it because you are ashamed?"

"Now what the hell put that idea into your head?" I said.

"I never see you," he said.

"You know I'm hardly around the place," I said. "I'm either out of town or running around the city like a chicken without a head. You know that."

"At least a hello," he said. "You are like a stranger."

"When I get a chance don't I come over Friday nights for supper?" I said.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks very much."

Sometimes there is no winning. "Well, what do you want then?" I said.

Because sometimes I wonder if they realize I am not a kid any more and I have a life of my own to lead, carrying on like that when I told them I was moving into an apartment of my own in the city and they carrying on as though they were losing me forever, as though I were dying or something. That was my big mistake. Promising I would be down for suppers every Friday night. I thought they would die of a broken heart if I didn't. I know better now. As though I have nothing better to do Friday nights than to drive out to Brooklyn and sit there all night eating boiled chicken and listening to the neighbors tell me how much I have changed and they can remember me when and Pa said But this is not the same. Mama expects you and I said I've been busy Pa. I said You know how they keep me on the run. I said I don't just work from nine to five you know and he said But she is not feeling good. Your own mother is not feeling good and you cannot find a little time one evening to see her? He didn't know what he was asking. But I could see he was getting all worked up so I told him all right. I told

him I'd try to get down but I couldn't promise anything. And then he will tell me I'm not a thoughtful son and I don't show any consideration, when I have been after her for over two months and she acting as though she was the Queen of Sheba and no man has ever put a hand on her and I had a mind to tell her who she thought she was fooling because we have models down at our place too but I thought better of it. I have found out there is just one way to treat her kind, go on telling them how pure and virtuous they are all the while you are laying them. The way she will jump the minute I put a hand on her. I said Don't you think you have carried this far enough? I said how long do you expect a fellow to go with you before you will so much as let him hold you and she said I just can't give myself to anyone. Well, I had a few ideas on that subject too, acting as if she didn't even know what a man was, when every salesman and buyer down at Town and Country Fashions has put his hand to her rump as though it was part of the furnishings and they haven't taken the statistics yet on how many have had her in bed. She must have seen I was getting impatient because she finally said yes but she must have looked into a crystal ball first. Picking the one week out of the entire year that my mother would choose to get sick in, and the one evening of that week she would expect me down to the house. I said Just tell me who he is. I said Any gypsy who can see that well into the future could make a fortune in no time. You don't *have* to go she said. But when I told her that was all right with me she started going on about not wanting to come between a man and his mother and I shouldn't do something I might regret later on. She didn't fool me. The day I stop being able to tell when a woman is out to put something over on me, I will be ready for the old folks home. When she told me

she had a date for that Saturday night and she couldn't see me until next week, it was not more than I expected. Telling me she was going out with some big out of town buyer and she couldn't break it and besides he was taking her to the Latin Quarter and I said I could take her there too, I said They let future sales executives in too you know. She changed her mind about being able to break her date pretty quick, then. If there ever was a date, and she was ever going to the Latin Quarter. She was lucky she was such a good looker, otherwise I'd have dropped her a long time ago. Holding me up like that, when I can get it in any hotel room for ten dollars and not take two months at it either though I will be the first to admit it is not the same thing, it is like drinking cheap gin and champagne I said. I said She just better not push her luck. I said She doesn't know just how close to the edge she is because I will jump through a hoop any time I have to but don't let that fool you. I won't get the short end. I have kissed feet and backsides too, to get what I want. I never had a father who owned a factory or could get me a job right off as assistant to the president. The best he could do was bring me up there as a shipping clerk at twenty a week and if it depended on just hard work and minding my own business I'd still be at it. That's one thing I have learned. If there is anything in this world you want you have got to go out after it never mind what you must do because I have heard more about commandments and being good than I can stand. I never saw them pin a medal on anyone for it. The ones they pin medals on have got two cars and servants and a house up in Scarsdale, and they didn't get that by just helping old ladies across the street.

"Well?" I said. "Tell me." Because if he had any complaints, I wanted to know what they were.

"Tell you what?" Pa said.

"I want to know what you're so sore about," I said. "You just don't appreciate how hard it is for me to get away."

"I appreciate, I appreciate," he said.

"Thanks," I said. "You sound it." And then they can't understand why I won't put myself out, with him taking an attitude like that. That's the trouble with old people, they think they are the only ones with feelings. "I'm glad to see my efforts aren't going unnoticed," I said.

He didn't hear a word. "It is a terrible thing to become old," he said.

"The thing to do is put away a bundle while you're making it so you can coast later on," I said.

"I do not mean about money," he said.

"Is there something else?" I said? "If you need a little, Pa, don't be ashamed to ask," I said. "You know I'm always ready to help out."

"We will manage," he said. "Thank you anyway." Making a motion with his hand as if to say what's money. He was too proud for that, I suppose. To let his own flesh and blood help him out. The only thing he wasn't too proud to do was wear that suit day in and day out until he probably didn't have to hang it up at night, it could stand up by itself.

"I do not have the strength to fight any more," he said.

"You don't have to, you know," I told him.

He looked at me.

"You could retire, you know. You could get out of that sweat-shop once and for all and take it easy a little. It's coming to you."

He looked at me as if I just told him the moon was made of green cheese or something. "On what would I live?" he said.

"I'll help out," I said. "It won't be easy but I'm willing to kick in something each week. You could get your union pension next year, and you'd get your social security in a couple of years after that. You'd make out fine."

"You are a good son at heart," he said. I'll say one thing. It took him long enough to find out. He patted me on the arm. "You have been thinking of this before, I can tell," he said.

"Sure," I said. "Did you think I enjoy seeing you sweat over that lousy machine day after day? At your age?"

I was sure I had him sold. I looked out the window then. We were only at Lexington Avenue. We must have been moving at the rate of about a block an hour. It's nothing I wouldn't expect. No one will ever convince me that whenever I go for a drive, every car in the city and the state too doesn't choose to use the same street I do.

And then he tells me a thing like: "No, I will not leave until I am ready. I will not give them the satisfaction." Going on about how there was no respect and they didn't put him in a corner when he was producing thirty, forty dresses a day, only now, when he was slower and they didn't care whether he stayed or went and so they put someone else at his place and him back there by the fan and the radiator because to them a man was like a shoe or a hat, when it got old you threw it out.

"I will not make it easy for him," he said.

"You're not making it any easier on yourself either," I said.

"I am not a shoe, to be thrown here and there," he said. He was beginning to get worked up.

"No one thinks you are," I said. "Mr. Feldman doesn't. It's just that business is business." But you can't reason with them when they get worked up like that.

"I will talk to the business agent," he said.

"It won't help you, Pa," I said. "The union can't do anything. A man's got a perfect right to tell his employees where to sit."

He didn't answer right away. He sat there looking down at his hands, his face empty under the hat brim. He must have been pulled up short, hearing the other side of it. I thought maybe it put some sense into him, but that only shows how wrong you could be.

"You think I am being foolish," he said.

"It doesn't matter what I think," I said. "It's just that you're raising a rumpus and making a lot of trouble for yourself when you could just as soon do as you're told."

"But to be treated like this, after thirty years. This is not the first time," he said.

"Well, you're not going to improve things, carrying on," I said. "I can tell you that much, Pa. You'll only make it worse."

"Someone must say something to him," Pa said.

"It'll only make him sore," I said. "You saw what happened in the office. He can be as stubborn as you," I said. "You make trouble for him and he'll make it for you."

"What do I care about trouble," Pa said. "I have had so much, a little more will not matter."

Then try to explain to him why he has had to struggle all his life and he has never made an easy nickel, with an attitude like that and sitting there in that hat and suit somebody should have taken out and burned five years ago at least because he has no sense of dignity, he will think nothing of going around looking like a ragpicker and his children beg in the streets. I'd buy him a new outfit in a second. But just mention it to him. The way he hangs on to it, you would think that suit was made of spun gold and there is only one like it in the world. He's right there. No one else would keep a suit that

long, afford a new one or not. And then he will talk about pride. I don't see how a man can even know the meaning of the word, when he will take no interest in his personal appearance and the only reason he dresses at all is that my mother is there to remind him. Sometimes I wonder why he even troubled to come the three thousand miles from the old country. He could have saved himself the trip, for all the good it did him. Wasting his life like that, slaving away in one stinking dress factory or another, living in some small hole of an apartment and never being able to afford for his children the things to which they were entitled. Well, if that was the way he wanted to lead his life, he has done it. And then he will have something to say to me because I am trying to better myself and to have a life I don't have to be ashamed of and I can look my children in the eye.

"You *could* think of someone else," I said.

"Someone else?" he said.

"Sure," I said. "Causing all that trouble doesn't help me any, you know. It isn't going to exactly endear me to Mr Feldman that it's my father who is making a lot of trouble for him for no good reason."

He looked at me. Just sat there and didn't move and looked at me as though he'd never seen me before.

"Well?" I said.

I thought he'd sit like that till doomsday. A regular wooden Indian. And me having to look at him and drive the car at the same time. It's a wonder we didn't have a smashup. After a while he said, "So that is why."

"That's why what?" I said.

"It would make you happy if I left the shop. It would be easier for you," he said.

"I never said that," I said.

"To think, my own son," he said.

"That's no way to look at it, Pa," I said. "It's just that I've got my whole life ahead. I have to —."

But he'd already stopped listening. Just wouldn't listen to reason. That's the way they are, reach a certain age and their ideas become fixed and they think nothing has changed and not a day has gone by since they were young. Well I had some news for him on that subject. But he already had his hand on the door.

"Let me out," he said.

"Just sit back and we'll be home in no time," I said. I didn't know he was serious. I never figured he would get so sore over a little thing like that.

"Let me out," he said, raising his voice. "I will get home by myself."

Lucky I turned just then to look at him. He was there over at the other end, pulling on the handle and trying to get the door open. And the car moving and a regular parade of them right behind me. He could have been out the door and under a car before I'd even know it. I didn't know which to do first, grab him or stop the car. Finally I reached over and grabbed him with one hand, holding on to the wheel with the other. All the time I was yelling at him. "What do you think you're doing?" I said. "You want to get killed?"

But it was all I could do to hold on to him, an old man and frail looking but he didn't stop for a minute, scrambling at the door and shouting, "Let me out. Let me out."

Finally I got the car stopped. They must have thought a lunatic was driving, the way the car swerved from one side to the other, then stopping dead there out in the middle of the street. First thing they began to blow their horns. "Papa," I said, "What's the matter with you?"

He broke loose before I could get a better grip. He didn't say a word, only sat there staring at me, trying to catch his breath, his hat knocked to one side. Then he got the door open and broke loose and jumped out of the car before I knew what was happening. His hat fell off but he chased it and picked it up on the run. If he'd have let it go or it got lost down a sewer some place, I'd have said the afternoon was not a total loss. Breaking out of the car like that on a dead run as if it was a kidnapping and me yelling after him and everyone turned and looking on so that if they saw us up on Seventh Avenue too they must have thought this was the road company, we were taking the show on tour. Staring first at him and then me and the car and the horns blowing and I thought Well damn you too. I thought if that's the way you feel about it I'm sorry and it's too damned bad because I never made this world but I have to live in it and if it's every man for himself I am not going to be trampled in the rush. I can run as fast as any, and you just watch my speed.

Finally I got the car started again. I will never know how I get into these things, first the one there in the john, and now him. It must be old age does something to their brains. And they will talk about the wisdom that comes with years. I started the car up and got it the hell out of there before a cop came over and I got a ticket for disrespecting my elders. I wouldn't be surprised.

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IT IS PINELLI at the door.

Haber thinks: Sure. Just let me get past supper and the kids off to bed and ready to sit down with the paper, and the phone will ring or it will be someone at the door. But he has managed a polite smile by the time he opens the door and looks out at Pinelli, waiting there in the hallway. "Yes?" he says.

"Good evening," Pinelli says. It is not as a reproach to his own abrupt, faintly irritable interrogation, which not even the smile ameliorates. It is simply Pinelli's own quiet, good manners, a little formal and completely at variance with what those in the apartment house know of him.

So he is brought to politeness himself, if grudgingly. "Good evening," he says in turn. Still he cannot imagine what Pinelli could want: the short, dark-skinned man who has been his next door neighbor for two years now and to whom he has not spoken more than twenty words at any one time, only the usual perfunctory greetings on the street, the usual commonplace remarks about the weather on going into or coming out of the building together. Haber thinks that: It's bad enough I am bothered by relatives and friends, on the one night out of the entire week I am set to relax in.

Yet his face shows nothing of his irritation; he hopes it does

not. He stands, a full head taller than Pinelli, in his undershirt and with his shoes unlaced and the paper still in one hand, waiting for him to speak. At his back in the apartment, the kitchen, his wife is tidying the last of supper's disarray. There comes to him, there in the doorway, the light clatter of dishware, of pot being stacked in pot. He listens; those sounds familiar and undeviating, marking and rounding off the small segments in which his life unfolds and falls away, day by day, with something like the inexorability of time itself. Apparently something of *this*, the listening, shows in his face. Because Pinelli says, "I'm sorry to bother you."

That expression of regret, apology, whatever it is, mollifies him. "That's all right," he says. His tone is suddenly softer, almost affable. "No bother. What can I do for you?" he says.

Pinelli does not look at him. It comes as a surprise to him to realize that Pinelli has not once turned up his face in the entire time they have been standing there. At various instants he has stood looking down at the floor or up the hall or at the wall opposite, so that he has seen Pinelli's countenance from that single point and angle of a little to the right and about a foot above his head, with the features falling away in successive promontories from beneath the one broad promontory of forehead and brow; but not once have they looked eye into eye. That's what comes of disreputable living, he thinks sardonically. They can't even look an honest man in the face. He doesn't really believe that. Yet he would like to. Now Pinelli stands looking up the hall, toward the front door. They are on the ground level, he in the front apartment and Pinelli in the back. Beyond the front door is night; the sidewalks extending intersticed and parallel beneath cold stars, to some ultimate perimeter of the city, the night itself.

"Your wife's selling raffles for some kind of club or something?" Pinelli says.

"Yes," he says.

"I'd like to buy some."

He looks at Pinelli. The expression on his face plainly shows that had he had to guess what Pinelli wanted, this would have been the last thing to occur to him. But all he says is, "I'm sure she'll be glad to hear it," and he half turns, away from the other, to call back into the apartment for her.

But she is already there, at his back, in the entranceway to the living room. She comes across the living room, in a neat print housedress and drying her hands on a dish towel. Yes, he thinks. Leave it to her. It must be a kind of telepathy they use, to know exactly and in advance when they are wanted for something they have a vital interest in, like a new coat or a washing machine, or customers for raffles. Any other time you can talk your head off, and they won't hear a word. So he only steps resignedly aside when she asks Pinelli into the apartment and turns and goes for her purse, her raffle book.

He follows Pinelli into the living room. Though he is a head taller, he is narrower by far. The other is built thickly; though the suit and overcoat he wears are of expensive cloth and with the natty folds and lines of custom tailored garments, the impression he gives is one of immediate and brazen physicality, as much as though he entered the room in only a T-shirt and shorts. He fills out even the coatsleeves; below the cuffs his hands are blunt, thick through the palms. Though I suppose in his business you have to be built like that, he thinks. Yet he doesn't know exactly what business it is. He knows only that the other is an agent for a trucking union. But about the apartment house, among those who claim to know more, there are

rumors of extortion, violence, rackets of various kinds. This is a world entirely alien to him. Though a lawyer, he is familiar only with that aspect of legality which concerns the commonplace, orderly business of closings, bequests, negligence suits.

It is when all this comes to him that he looks upon the other differently. What was simply irritation has become a kind of wary alertness, and surprise too, so that coming up behind the other, there is now an expression upon his face such as he would have if he discovered a tiger in his living room. Again he is aware of that false quality to his invitation, his voice. "Have a seat," he says with forced heartiness, and passes the other on the way to his own chair. To his surprise the other says, "Thanks," and seats himself, almost gingerly, at one end of the sofa. For a moment they sit facing each other in silence. Then his wife's voice, preceding her from the other room, begins its unbroken, cheery flow.

Pinelli rises the instant his wife returns to the room. Sure, Haber thinks. He will take his hat off to women and give them his seat on the subway and he loves his mother, but he will think nothing of beating a man into unconsciousness. This is conjecture on his part and he knows it. He does not take his eyes from the other. There is that schoolboyish quality to the other's manner; the deference, the elaborate courtesy. He is hatless. Yet he conveys something of the quality of a man standing with downcast eyes and his hat in his hands, while his wife enters the room and bustles up to him behind the bright even soprano fanfare of her voice, a thin silver ballpoint pen in one hand and a rafflebook in the other. He thinks of her talking as a spiel. Listening to it he thinks: She should have been a man. She should have been a man and a salesman, and she could make five times as much as I do, with a line like that. He is

thinking at that instant of all the harsh remarks she has made of Pinelli in the past, at one time or other, and of the hearty unequivocal amiability of her manner now. The smile that comes into his face is mildly ironic, tolerant, a little amused.

But neither of them are looking. His wife says, "I didn't know my advertising was that good. How did you find out I was selling raffles?"

"I heard some of the people from the house talking," Pinelli says. His speech is straightforward, direct. Yet this is the second time Haber senses a kind of craft, a kind of balancing and assessing, in the other's tone and glance, though it is nothing about which he can yet be definite.

If his wife senses anything, she does not indicate it. "Well, it's nice of you to take the trouble to come in," she says.

"It's no trouble at all," Pinelli says. He reaches back for his wallet, pushing his coat out of his way. "I'll take a couple of books," he says.

Though neither he nor his wife make a sound, Pinelli stops. He looks from one to the other of them. The expression that comes into his face is one of sudden caution, as though he has caught some change in the air but doesn't know what it is yet. He stands with his coat hoist back from one hip, his hand in his pocket. Yet their astonishment does not last beyond the moment.

His wife is the first to speak. "That's very nice of you," she says, "but you don't really want two books, do you?" Her voice is cautionary, gentle; the tone in which you tell a child something for his own good.

"Why is that?" Pinelli says. He is not belligerent. He is curious, baffled a little. "Is there a rule about how many one person can buy?"

"No, of course not," she says, and watching her, both of them, as she proceeds to explain that it is simply the cost, as there are twenty-five raffles to a book and each raffle is fifty cents, Haber senses sooner than she that what she is saying is irrelevant, is just so much agitation on the air without point or pertinence. He would buy them if they were a dollar a piece, he thinks.

It is when his wife is seated at the small desk at the far wall, writing Pinelli's name neatly and methodically on each of the fifty raffle stubs while Pinelli stands at her shoulder with his wallet in his hand, that it comes to him there is some reciprocity involved. A man to whom you have not said a hundred words in a year does not come to your door polite as a floorwalker and offer to buy twenty-five dollar's worth of your wife's raffles, just like that, he thinks. Yet at the same instant he tells himself it is only his lawyer's mind speaking. I have been around people always looking to get something out of someone too long, he thinks. This is something he has been telling himself more and more frequently, of late. It is the ease and invariableness with which he now lapses into cynicism, which disturbs him. Not everyone is out only for what they can get, he tells himself angrily. He would like to believe that. He sits watching the other, the newspaper in random folds in his lap, his legs straight out before him. He would like to believe something better than that of people generally. Yes, he says quietly, to himself. That's what it is. I have been in the legal business too long.

Still he is as certain as if he had been told, that it is some ulterior purpose that has brought Pinelli to his door and into his apartment, though he as yet has no idea what it is. It'll come out soon enough, he thinks, sardonically, grimly. All I have to

do is wait. At the desk his wife writes on, Pinelli at her shoulder, his wallet in his hand. The pen glints now and then in the lamplight, catching and losing the light in sudden brief slivers as it moves over the paper. Then she is through. She arranges the strewn raffle receipts in a tidy sheaf and rises and hands them to Pinelli, with a smile. It is while Pinelli is counting the twenty-five dollars from the thick fold of bills he has taken from his pocket that Haber thinks: Now. He should be ready to ask whatever he has come to ask, any minute. Because that money is not just payment for the raffles but for whatever favor he has had in mind all along, as well. And he feels a sudden cold anger at what he takes to be the other's calculated presumption. He must believe those he can't beat up he can buy, he thinks. Laying out twenty-five dollars like that for what is to him just so much paper, as easy as you pay for a nickel bar of candy.

This has long been a standing source of outrage to many in the neighborhood: that the man known to be involved in the least reputable business, on the very edge of the law if not beyond it, should wear the most expensive clothing and drive the newest car. Why not? Haber thinks. He doesn't have to sit in an office or run from courthouse to courthouse or take calls any hour of the night. All he does is go out and strongarm a couple of guys, and he's made a month's pay. At the desk Pinelli stands clumsily pocketing the receipts. His wife stands waiting for him to finish and go, filling the interim with the light empty noises of her talk.

Haber ceases to watch them. He takes the paper from his lap and straightens it and tries once more to find his place. He expects Pinelli to turn and speak to him at any moment. He does not want to be looking at Pinelli when he does. I might

forget myself, he thinks with a sarcasm he actually relishes. I might forget whom I am talking to. I might say the wrong thing and he will take out his gun and shoot me down, he tells himself with mock concern. He sits like that for a full two minutes, bent rigidly at the paper and not reading a word; waiting for the other to address him, to speak the opening words. He already knows what it will be about. What else? he tells himself. To him it appears so apparent what between a lawyer and a man who is involved in something illicit is the one natural common topic, that he does not even trouble putting it into words. He only thinks: If he believes he has put that money where it is going to do him some good, he has a surprise coming.

He sits coldly and inviolably erect. Behind the paper his face is cold; motionless as stone. So great is his resentment at the other's presumption, he takes an actual pleasure in his rudeness. He waits for his wife to cease. At the desk his wife is saying something about the weather and how hard it is to get through the winter with children; domesticity's small and myriad travails out of which she spins the light endless thread of her talk. Then she ceases. He listens in astonishment as Pinelli responds in kind, going on about his own mother and childhood.

Fifteen minutes later he is still at it. It is as if a dam has given way and he must go on like that, reminiscent, ceaseless, though neither Haber nor his wife have said a word. Neither have they looked interested. His wife stands at the desk looking out at Pinelli with an expression on her face of open and mounting annoyance so like his own, they could be taken for brother and sister. He thinks, It serves her right. He thinks with almost positive glee: Next time she will think twice about whom she

invites into the house, twenty-five dollars worth of raffles or no. It is when his wife, who has already made several attempts to disengage herself or at least to slow Pinelli down, turns her face coldly into Pinelli's and says without hesitation or falter, in a voice utterly polite in manner yet ruder than he, Haber, could ever be, "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I have work to do;" and turns and walks from the room leaving Pinelli within the ruins of his broken recital, his mouth still rounded about a word, his eyes widening in astonishment—that he relents.

He begins again the familiar struggle with himself over a course he knows to be proper but to which he is opposed out of some obscure qualm. I must be getting weak-minded, he tells himself. Beyond the room there begins the sudden commotion of his wife's ruthless tidying, the savage rattle and clatter of dishware, pots, the loud opening and closing of closets. He knows what that means. Yet the misgiving he feels over the way he has treated Pinelli is genuine. Yes, he thinks, quietly, ruefully, It must be old age. It must be addling of the brain, when I begin to believe I must be courteous to every hoodlum who chooses to knock at my door and buy raffles from my wife. But it is as a man living alone, lonely, to whom no visitors come, at whose door no neighbor knocks, that he now thinks of the other.

This is not strictly the case. He knows of those others who do visit Pinelli; men like Pinelli himself, in expensive suits and driving late model cars and with that one flagrant air of masculinity, like that of professional athletes. But they don't count, he thinks. It is at that moment he comes closest to feeling sorry for Pinelli. They face each other from across the room. He sits slouched in the club chair, looking out over his lowered paper, his legs straight out before him. Pinelli stands holding the

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raffle stubs, still in his overcoat, still astonished, with an expression on his face such as a man would have who has been groping in the dark and has suddenly had the lights turned on all around him. Though the heartiness in Haber's voice is forced, he means well. "Take a load off your feet," he says in a voice a little too loud, too sudden.

But there is no gainsaying the commotion she goes on making in the kitchen. He knows what he has to do. He puts his paper aside. "Care to watch some television?" he says, and rises and goes directly to the set and stands before it until it is tuned in and the volume turned up, before he goes past the other now seated on the sofa and out of the room to the kitchen.

It is when he sees her, the expression on her face, again, that his earlier resentment at Pinelli's presence returns. Yes, he thinks, sourly. It would be this evening out of the entire week that he must choose to be sociable and not let me read the paper in peace. He couldn't pick some evening when I'm not home. She is before an open dish closet. She turns on him at once. "Well?" she says, her voice barely held to a whisper. "Is he ever going home? Or should I make up the sofa bed for him?"

But the television is turned up loud enough. He says, "How should I know? I didn't invite him in. He didn't come in to buy anything from me." Then he looks again at her face. More seriously he says, "He's a regular 'man who came to dinner', isn't he?"

She looks at him coldly. "Why doesn't he go?" she says. "He bought his raffles. What more does he want?"

"For a while I thought I knew," he says, and he tells her what earlier he believed to be the ulterior purpose of the other's

visit, though now he is no longer so convinced. She looks at him with sudden alarm.

"You wouldn't help a man like that," she says. "A hoodlum."

"I couldn't if I wanted to," he says. "I'm not a criminal lawyer. My name isn't Leibowitz."

She turns and faces him squarely. From the other room comes the brash, constant uproar of the television. "Then tell him to go," she says.

"Sure," he says. "I'll just go out there and take him by the lapels and tell him to get the hell out and —."

"I didn't mean that," she says in a flat, dogged tone.

"Then what did you mean?" he says. Both their voices have risen. It is then he thinks of how it must appear to the other, abandoned there in the livingroom, seated amidst strange furniture, before the television, they two in a huddle out in the kitchen. He says, quieter now: "Even if he didn't have thirty pounds on me and he couldn't knock me down without even half trying, there are certain rudiments of courtesy, you know."

But there is already to her features a set, peremptory quality and he knows there is now no turning the bent of her mind. She stands with one hand on her hip, the other braced on the counter beneath the dish closet. She says, "All I know is I want that man out of here." She does not look at him. She speaks as though to the closet, the pots and dishware ranked in orderly, mute accumulation within. "Does he think because he has bought twenty-five dollars worth of raffles he is entitled to take over our apartment and stay forever?" she says.

He has already started past her. "I'll ask him," he says, and goes on through the doorway, on his way back to the living-room.

It is a matter of five steps. Both bedrooms are off the foyer,

the door to theirs slightly ajar while the children sleep behind the closed door of the other. He comes upon Pinelli suddenly. So loud, so unremitting is the television, he is able to come along the foyer and into the living room unheard, to find Pinelli with his back turned and bent to the window, holding one slat of blind open while he stands motionless as wood, peering through. He startles Pinelli. He crosses the room to the television set and bends and lowers the volume and says into the abruptly reduced noise, "How is it out there? Snowing?" He is not looking at Pinelli. Yet it is almost as though he can see Pinelli as he whirls from the window, rattling the blind in his haste, standing for a moment, discomposed, startled, his mouth open a little. When he does look at Pinelli he thinks: He looks just like a man who has been caught with one hand in the free lunch and the other in the till.

"Snowing?" Pinelli says.

"Sure," Haber says. "You looked like you had your eye on *something* out there."

But he is immediately sorry he has taken that tone with the other. This is a failing of his too: that he cannot be ruthless even in his own self interest. At the window Pinelli stands with a hurt and baffled air of some large animal shot suddenly from ambush. He watches Haber. "Oh, that," he says with spurious nonchalance. He makes a gesture with his hand. "I was just looking out at the street." His voice has an urgent quality; in his manner there is now a forced and transparent heartiness, like that of the owner of a failing business. He says, "I always like to look out at the street. When I was a kid we used to always live in the back. All you could see was telephone poles and clothes lines. You had to go downstairs to know what was going on in the front of the house." His voice rises as he

speaks. It is as though he hears his voice for the first time; the words, substanceless and trivial, like so many scraps, the loud and palpable dissembling. The heartiness fails him. "You know what I mean?" he finishes weakly.

He looks at Haber; openfaced, transparent. The impression he gives is of a small boy who has done something forbidden and been found out. It is that Haber cannot bear to see a man so, without some last shred of dignity, that he speaks finally. In the awkward pause that follows he says out of embarrassment for the other, in the way a man will throw a garment about another to cover his nakedness: "I know how you feel. We used to live in the back for a while too."

That sets the other off. Again he is on the subject of his childhood. Yet Haber is not totally devoid of cunning. Oh no, he thinks. There are some things I have learned in twelve years of lawyering. Though the expression of bright and undistracted attention on his face does not change, he cuts the other off suddenly. He raises one hand, as though giving a signal, and half turns his head over his shoulder toward the bedroom. "Excuse me," he says. "I think one of the kids called."

He has been sitting in his chair. He rises and leaves his paper on the seat and goes directly to the children's bedroom. He has heard nothing. Yet he enters the room in the bright and open manner of a man going to a roomful of children awake and expecting him. Once inside, the door closed behind him, he becomes furtive. Like the livingroom, the bedrooms are to the front of the house, facing out on the street. Though he must wait a moment for his eyes to focus, the room is not totally dark; faint light from a street lamp, falling into the room past the closed blinds, suffuses everything.

He advances to the window. He picks his way, almost on

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tip toe, around the beds, past the chair and bureau, holding his breath down. Just like Sam Spade, he thinks sardonically. He is not particularly noiseless despite his stealth. But neither does he wake the children. He makes it to the window without mishap. He has no idea what he will see beyond it. It is because he feels the other is in some way using him and he resents it, that he has troubled to deceive the other. He bends to the window and carefully raises a single slat of blind and looks out. Light from the street lamp falls in a pale, broken bar across his face. He is disappointed. What he sees is no different from what he has ever seen all the myriad times he has looked out at night: the street lamp, empty sidewalks, the intermittent, bulked shadows of cars parked along both curbs, the soaring sky beyond. He looks both ways along the street. He thinks: Maybe he really was only looking out at the street. At this point he does not know quite what to think. He stands there a moment longer, bent to the window, the light in shapes like broken glass on his face. Then he lowers the blind and turns and goes from the room.

He watches television for an hour. Pinelli sits on the sofa, watching too. Yes, he thinks wryly, to himself. She may be opening that sofa bed after all. But it is with an actual sense of dismay that he turns and looks at Pinelli, when the program finishes and Pinelli makes no move to go. What the hell does he think he is up to now? he thinks harshly, angrily, beginning to work himself up. Enough is enough, he thinks. Yet he cannot bring himself to speak it aloud. He sits staring at Pinelli for a full minute, as though by its very intensity his gaze will impinge on the other's mind and impel him to go. Pinelli sits with his face averted: in its very fixedness is the suggestion that his avoidance of Haber's gaze is premeditated, cognizant.

Haber's sudden voice has that quality of false, inordinate cheerfulness he cannot bear in salesmen. "Well," he says. "Another hard day at the office tomorrow." His voice falls on his ears like a stranger's: the words have a trite, glossy ring. Normally his manner is direct, unequivocal; frank. At that moment what he resents most about the other is being brought to this. He is aware of the irony: that he should now take on the tone and manner which earlier he had mocked at in his wife. He thinks of her there in the kitchen, attentive, catching every word. We all get our turn, he thinks.

But he goes on. Though Pinelli sits as if he hasn't heard a word, leaning forward a little, his gaze fixed on the television screen, an expression of innocent and childlike absorption on his face, Haber believes he sees a swift, covert shifting of the eyes back to where he sits, a momentary movement of the head. He heard me all right, he thinks. He says, louder than before: "It sure has been a long day." But he doesn't yawn. That would be putting it on a little *too* thick, he thinks.

Apparently it is not thick enough. Because Pinelli turns and looks back at him, openfaced, pleasant, only sweating a little about the face, the forehead. He speaks in the oblivious, pleasant tones of a man at home and among friends. "You know the *Late Show's* got a good picture tonight. Sometimes they get some of these old ones and they're better than —."

It is hard to say whether it is Haber's actual voice that stops him, or merely the expression that comes into Haber's face before he speaks a word. "The *Late Show*?" Haber says. Again his voice falls on his ears like a stranger's. He is a man given usually to venting his anger in quieter tones, in derision, ironic asides. It is as though he has come to the last straw, and now he does not know himself. "Don't you know what time it

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is?" he says in cold harsh tones which surprise himself most of all. He says, "I don't know if you have anything to do tomorrow or not. I know *I* have to be up early to go to work and spend a tough day in court. I haven't said anything until now but it is a hell of a thing to come into a man's house and just sit there and take up his time and not know when it's a reasonable time to leave. Well, if you don't know, I'm going to tell you. It's time."

And he sits there, bent forward a little, looking upon the other with cold eyes. He is ready for anything. Not for a moment has he forgotten to whom he is speaking. Now he will take his gun out and shoot us all down, he thinks. It is that Pinelli does not look up, but sits staring quietly and vacantly down at the floor, his face, his entire body, suddenly slack, with the stuffed and inert aspect of a rag doll, that astonishes Haber most. Then Pinelli does look up. "Please," he says so quietly Haber cannot be sure he has heard.

He knows his wife has heard. The kitchen is suddenly quiet, the constant barrage of closing doors and dishware and business generally which has gone on without break or abatement from the moment he left her, now stilled. He does not have to look back to know she is there, just inside the foyer, out of sight, listening to every word. Why not? he thinks wryly. When has she ever missed a word of anything that has been said in this house? Before him Pinelli is a changed man. What Haber remarks is his physical aspect only. He sits, still in his coat, in an attitude of volitionless and total collapse, his arms limp as strings at his sides, his vast torso flaccid and inert, in sudden bulging rolls, within the tightly buttoned suit, the shirt and tie. He is sweating; he sits like a man just through exerting himself, his face slick with perspiration, his breath coming

in deep noisy gasps, though in the past ten minutes he has not so much as moved, his gaze fixed on the television screen. In his anger Haber actually believes it is this that is keeping him. He is about to rise and go to the television and turn it off out of pure spite, when there flashes suddenly in his mind an apprehension of the true nature of those infinitesimal, myriad shiftings of eye and motions of head, which earlier he had taken to be signs of craft. He is afraid, he tells himself quietly, in slow and quiet amazement. The man is scared stiff.

At that moment Pinelli turns. He looks at Haber out of an ashen face. "Outside," he says, making a weak gesture at the window. "There are men." And as Haber sits there, bent forward a little, first shock, then disbelief, and consternation last of all, passing over his face in quick succession, Pinelli tells him of the men somewhere outside waiting to get him alone and kidnap and kill him.

Yet it is as though he has known it all along. Of course, he thinks quietly, to himself, thinking of the evening; the transparent subterfuge of the raffles, the talking, the small stratagems of delay. Sitting there, bent stiffly forward, his hands in stiff fronds on the chair arms, it seems to him that such a situation is only the fitting and logical end to an evening to which he had looked forward all week and during whose entirety he has felt only put upon and harrassed.

Still his first impulse is to help. "Now just take it easy," he says. "There must be something we can do." But he cannot think what. In part this is because once the shock, the alert, small heave and intake of breath at hearing it spoken, is over, the idea of men waiting outside to murder Pinelli does not seem wholly real to him. But he is immediately out of his seat, turning off the television and fumbling for a moment at the

drawer of an end table, so moved is he by the other's look of profound and terrible despair. He finds the cigarettes. "Care for one?" he asks in a warm, sudden voice from which he can barely keep his agitation, and he lights both his and Pinelli's cigarette with a single match. Pinelli sits staring straight before him, unaroused, dead, the cigarette held in a dead hand; as though seeing all at once the doom which is the end and outcome of his life, and the steps which have brought him to it. Poor bastard, Haber thinks.

But he brings Pinelli to life unwittingly. When he says, "How about the police? Can't we call the police and they'll take care of this?" Pinelli straightens in his seat as though jerked upright with a physical hand. "No, please," he says, his voice immediate, almost frantic. "No cops. Please no cops!" He reaches upward, as though actually to put a restraining hand on Haber. But Haber is too far out, at the end table, dropping the burnt match in an ash tray. He watches the hand fall away. He watches Pinelli, inert again, motionless, the cigarette burning down in his motionless hand, as though all of will and strength left him had been expended in that vain single gesture. Watching Pinelli, platitudes of all description come to Haber's mind. Live by the sword, die by the sword: is one. By nature he is a moralist. But he knows better this time. Yes, he thinks. A man needs help and I will stand here telling him it's his own fault, he should have led a different life. He says gently, quietly, "I was only trying to help."

Pinelli does not look at him. Smoke rises in a blue column beside him, from his dead hand on the couch. "Just let me stay here a while," he says. "I won't be any trouble."

He stands before Pinelli, looking down. He is unaware of the ludicrousness of his appearance; his hair disheveled, in his

undershirt, shoes half laced. There is an urgent quality in his voice he does not intend. "You can't just sit there," he says. "There must be something you can do."

In disbelief he listens to Pinelli say in turn: "It's all right. It'll be all right." He says in the calm even fanatic tones of a man speaking an exorcism: "All I have to do is stay here a while. I'll just stay here and they'll get tired of waiting and they'll go away." Only at the end does his voice rise a little, a little shrill, piercing on the ear. "Just let me stay here," he says, looking up. "I won't bother anyone or get in anyone's way. Honest. I won't make a peep."

He has heard Haber's wife before Haber does. He does not look in her direction. Nor does Haber. In the momentary stillness they hear her pass along the foyer and into the bedroom, with the small hard strides of a woman controlling herself. Yes, he thinks, quiet, almost peaceful. I know that walk too. For a moment he and Pinelli look at each other across the brief physical space that separates them, the two faces — the one ashen, full, still with an aspect of good digestion, of feeding on rich foods; the other intent, thin, contemplative and harried at the same time — with one thought. He does not wait for her to call. He says, "Excuse me," and straightens and turns and is half way across the room when her voice comes unraised, level, almost nonchalant, inadvertent almost, on the stillness. "Dave," she says. "Could you come here a minute?"

He reaches the bedroom and enters, closing the door quietly behind him. She is at the far end, at the window, looking out. She turns and comes toward him at once, already speaking. "It's out of the question," she says, abruptly, fiercely, though he hasn't said a word. "He must be crazy, asking a thing like that, expecting people to get involved."

He looks at her. He loses control of himself. "What the hell else is he supposed to do, just go out there and let them take him by the arm and bring him to wherever it is they are going to murder him?" he says.

The tone of his voice surprises them both. She looks at him as if seeing him for the first time. Nonetheless she speaks again in that flat hard voice like a man's. "That's his worry," she says. "It's no concern of ours."

"No," he says. "We'll just throw him out of the house and go to bed and have a good night's sleep and read about it in tomorrow's papers over a cup of coffee."

She looks at him without blinking. "That's not fair and you know it," she says.

"No?" he says. "Tell me why not?" His voice has begun to rise; he snares it back again. "Isn't that exactly what it amounts to?"

"No it doesn't," she says, unequivocal, testy. "You make it sound as if I'm cold-blooded and I don't care if he gets killed or not."

"Do you?" he asks. But he has gone too far. He knows it. He looks away, beyond her, at the room itself, in neat and decorous arrangement, the bed, dresser, the one lamp burning tranquilly on the night table. "I didn't mean that," he says, quieter, placative.

"That's all right," she says in a clear, almost natural, almost hearty voice. "And since you are being such a good Samaritan I won't expect to see much of you in the coming months either, while you are gone to this place and that, saving lives."

He looks at her. She is before him, almost his height, in the neat print housedress and with an expression of cold and implacable resolve he has never seen on her face before. "Just what do you mean by that?" he says.

But he already knows. Knowing, he can speak to himself, in unison, every word she says, so that it seems to him he is listening only to himself. She says: "I don't mean a thing. I'm just making a logical deduction." She says in that almost natural, almost hearty voice in which there is the unmistakable, faint jarring undertone of outrage, derision: "Since you're willing to jeopardize your family's safety and well-being tonight in the interests of a perfect stranger, there's no reason why you shouldn't be running off from time to time doing it elsewhere. There are an awful lot of people in this world needing help, you know."

"They're not all in my living-room," he says angrily. He says, "All it is is a phone call to the police, or just letting him stay here a while. That's not a whole lot to ask." Then he says, "What do you mean, jeopardize the safety and well-being of my family?"

And again he listens to himself answer himself, in her voice, in her tone of ironic and brookless contradiction, the words anticipant, familiar to him as all the events of his life are familiar. "Oh," she says. "Maybe I'm mistaken." She says, "Maybe you have a written guarantee all signed and notarized that I don't know about, that these men won't do anything to you or your family for interfering, for putting your nose in where it doesn't belong. They do that sometimes too, you know."

Listening, he feels again the familiar qualm over what he knows to be the one sensible thing to do, but to which he is opposed out of some obscure notion of what he would like his conduct to be. When she goes on about how in some way there might even arise the vague suspicion of his involvement with such men, which could be death to his practice even if it did not raise the question of his actual disbarment, he can make

no rejoinder. He looks at her; the neat, active, still trim, still handsome woman who fifteen years ago concurred in his desire to be a lawyer, then married him and then saw that he went to and completed law school by working to support them both. He is like two men: the one standing at her side, speaking in her voice, in hard and logical assessment of the course he proposed, balancing risk and gain like the two columns in an accountant's ledger, wins. It is as though he has been bemused and he suddenly comes to himself. He thinks of all the stories about gang killings he has read in the newspapers — the perfunctory and anonymous violence within some commonplace, familiar setting threatless as the bed or room in which a man sleeps; a barber shop, a front porch, some peaceful sunny avenue at midday. I must really be getting softheaded, he thinks. I don't owe him anything. I don't even know him well. He says, distinct, a little irritated, a little brusque: "Okay. You win. I'll get him right out of here."

"It's not a question of winning," she says immediately, sharply, as though out of some reflex of opposition. Then it is as though she sees something in his face. "All right," she says, mollifying him with a gesture, a movement of the head. "I won't say another word."

But she does not leave, standing there looking at him, waiting. He turns on her. "Now won't that look fine," he tells her. "Both of us marching out of here like a jury and then telling him —."

Then she is gone. He thinks: Yes, this is just the time to be concerned with the *look* of things. But his purpose does not vary. Though he stands for a moment in the center of the room, in the dim light thrown out by the single lamp, abstracted, motionless, in the attitude of a man making up his

mind between one thing and another, there is not the smallest doubt in his mind as to what he will do.

Still, he does not go right out to Pinelli. He knows she would. She wouldn't waste a minute, he tells himself. But he lacks her single-mindedness, her quality of arrant and peremptory assurance like that of corporation presidents or generals in battle. He knows how she would handle it: getting Pinelli out of the apartment in a minute and the door locked after him and going directly to bed without a second thought. If you are going to do it that is the way to do it, he tells himself, quietly, musingly. Apparently it is not to be his way, because he has been standing for almost a full minute already, on the exact spot she left him, and when he finally does move it is not toward the door at all. He feels a desperate urgency to sit, to be relieved of the sheer physical encumbrance of his body, the burden of his organs and bones. He goes to the bed. He sinks down slowly, in a sitting position, on the drawn spread. The sigh he releases involuntarily, as though in response to some sudden pain, some sudden release from pain, is lost in the sound the bedsprings make. He sits like that, on the bed's edge, bent forward from the waist a little, his arms braced at his sides. He does not quarrel with himself. He knows himself: the tractable, reasonable nature on which he has set the course of his life and based every action. That's it, he tells himself. Reason. Common sense. We are all so damned full of common sense we will stand and watch a man drown and not so much as lift a finger, because we don't know him and he doesn't owe us anything and we may drown ourselves. He thinks: It is only some damned fool, who will not think twice and jump in and risk his own life, when there is nothing in it for him.

This is harsh and he knows it. He relents. He does not look at himself in the mirror. He sits, his breathing light, fitful; divided between that which he knows he will and must do, and some old ineradicable dream of brotherhood out of his youth. Yes, he thinks, dryly, unremittingly. They ought to hear me going on like this around Park Row, going on like some green kid. He thinks: *But what else is a man to do?* Then he comes to himself. Sitting there on the bed, erect, formal, his reflection in the mirror, he speaks to himself the fundamental fact and premise of his life: I am thirty-eight years old and I have worked hard for everything I've got and this is no time to begin going in for heroics.

He rises from the bed. In all the time he has been sitting there, not once has he doubted the wisdom of his course. He does not go to the window. He knows he will see nothing there he has not seen before: empty sidewalks, cars in static file along the curb, the immeasurable, wild panorama of star and sky as familiar to him as the room in which he sleeps and strange as all dreaming. He opens the door quietly. He comes out into the foyer quietly, as though to come upon Pinelli by surprise. He does so: seeing Pinelli, the actual shape and heft of him, there on the sofa, in his opened coat, another cigarette burning down in his hand, just as he left him, inert, motionless, constant it seems as any furniture in the room, Haber experiences a fall and dying of something in the blood. He does not falter. When that earlier rage at himself starts up again, he cuts it off at once. We can't all be goddamned saints, he says harshly, and goes on into the living room to tell Pinelli.

TO BE A MAN

HE HAD ALWAYS known what his daughter-in-law was. First he had told his wife, and then, in anger during an argument, he had told his son as well. That had been only a week before his son and the girl took their abrupt weekend trip down to Maryland, where there was no waiting between the license and the ceremony, to return married.

But he had looked the other way. You could not say he accepted the girl, but he resigned himself to having as a daughter-in-law a girl of whom it was said that half the young men in the neighborhood had slept with her and the other half hadn't not because of any discrimination on her part but simply because she hadn't had the time. "She will change," he told himself. But he didn't really believe that. He had come from the old country at thirteen, almost a man, with a man's set, undeviable way of thinking. The old country's fatalism was already in his bones: the belief that the pattern of one's life was fixed from the instant of birth, as though a kind of predestination were involved. If he expected no change, he nonetheless hoped for it, with that curious capacity of the human mind to entertain paradoxical notions at one and the same time.

For a while it was all right. The stories about the girl which had once been so rife in the neighborhood now ceased. He

could almost pretend he had never heard them. Yet when his daughter-in-law gave birth, with his son Paul in the army already more than a year and fighting somewhere in Italy, in an immediate reflex he counted back the months to when his son had last been in on furlough. "It is all right," he said. He said it at once, before he had even finished counting. He did not wish to find anything, to uncover some discrepancy that could topple the edifice of hope and yearning (and perhaps self-deceit too) he'd been building since that evening his son had returned from Maryland, and which had finally afforded him some peace of mind even if it had not quite rubbed out the shame.

He never doubted that the child was his son's, his grandson. A year later when the stories about his daughter-in-law resumed, this single fact became the vortex for all his acts, his feelings. The stories had in nowise changed. She was again going out with any man who would have her, which had been shameful enough before her marriage. In the evenings she would leave the child with a neighbor for an hour or so and go down to the bar along the street and sit drinking the beer or rye the men there would buy her. Sometimes she would be gone for an entire evening, going out not only with old friends who remembered what she had been like, but with any of the soldiers or sailors she would pick up at the bar.

No one ever actually told him this, though several of his friends hinted around. But it seemed to be in the very air of the neighborhood, something omnipresent and miasmic, with which he soiled himself merely by walking through the streets. When he became aware of it, he was not surprised. "I have always known," he told himself. Yet he felt only regret, not vindication. He felt shame too, imagining that everyone in

the neighborhood regarded him out of quizzical eyes. Finally he could bear it no longer. One evening he did not even wait for the family to finish dessert. He had four children, of whom his son Paul was the eldest, having been nineteen when he married. Of the three remaining children, two were daughters. What he now had to say to his wife he did not believe fit for children's hearing. "Go," he said. "Leave the table. I have something to say to your mother that is not for your ears."

He waited until they left the table before he began. He spoke in the old tongue, as he had long since learned they only listened from the other room anyway. Perhaps he sent them from the room because he didn't want them to see his face. "I have been hearing things," he said abruptly. "They are not pleasant things."

His wife sat adjacent to him, so that he had to turn in order to address her. She was a lean woman, with the hard surpriseless aspect of someone who has encountered only travail. She wore a starched apron over a neat cotton housedress unidentifiable from and interchangeable with all the housedresses she had ever worn. "What have you heard?" she said.

"There are stories that she is carrying on again, that she is like before she got married," he said, speaking in the old tongue.

"So?" she said. She watched him, her face impassive, quiet as stone.

"It is a terrible thing," he said.

"Do you know for sure?" she said. "How do you know it is the truth?"

"She is a mother now," he said, his voice rising. "She is no longer a child."

"Are you sure?" she said again. "Maybe they are only stories."

He did not look at her. "My son, my son," he cried. "What have you done?"

Then he had control of himself again. They sat, silent, facing each other. In the other room the children were silent, as though without seeing his face they knew he sat anguished and inconsolable. He bent toward her. He began to speak in a voice constrained and low, entirely different from his previous tone except for the intenseness, the passion. "I will find out," he said. "I will know for sure. For the sake of the child I must know."

She looked upon him, her face peremptory yet not unkind. "Why?" she asked. She did not wait for him to reply, going on. "If it is not true, people will talk anyway. And if it is, what can we do? How can we change it?"

"The child is our flesh and blood too," he said. "Are we to turn our faces?"

"It will hurt too much to know for sure, to know without doubt," she said quietly.

But it was as if he had not heard a word. "I must know," he said. "Once and for all I must know if I am to hold up my head among my neighbors."

At first he did not know how to go about verifying the stories. Actually he did not need to verify them, since he already believed them, though he had not yet admitted it to himself. "There must be a way," he told himself. It took him two days to hit upon it. Several evenings a week he went to a neighbor's house to play pinochle or gin rummy. The next evening, when he came down into the street after supper, he went in a direction contrary to that of the house in which the evening's card game was being held. "It is the only way," he said.

He began to watch his daughter-in-law's house. Each evening he walked the twelve blocks to the house, his collar

up against the cold, wearing a shapeless felt hat. It was February. He stood in the entrance of a darkened store opposite, staring out at the high flimsy building. It rose against the night in alternate vivid rectangles of yellow and black like the boxes of some gigantic checkerboard. He gave no thought to the cold or that he could instead have been in his neighbor's comfortable apartment, playing cards. His sole thought was of what he was bent upon, of what he hoped to discover. On his way, he went past Mr Rappaport's candy store, at which all the young men of the neighborhood congregated. But he never turned his head, not so much as glancing at the yellow splotch its light made upon the sidewalk, at the figures dimly visible beyond the slightly fogged windows. Yet he thought how those inside who saw him go by must immediately know his errand, speculating on it; the young ones wondering probably if they could get his daughter-in-law too since she didn't scruple about what she went out with providing only that it wore pants.

But he forgot that too, standing in the darkened store entrance opposite the house, opposite the sign suspended in the bit of garden like a lawyer's shingle which he did not have to read to know what it said, knowing the painted words from all the previous times he had visited the house: Terrace Apartments. Modern Furnished Apartments and Rooms For Rent. By Week or Month. He thought of the times he had visited his son in that shabby house, in his shabby, ill-kept two room apartment. "Ah," he said, "Ah," thinking of the course he had dreamed long ago his son's life would take and of what had actually happened. He stood peering out at the house. Without him being aware of it, his eyes filled with tears, "Paul," he said into the darkness, the silence devoid of echo. "Dear God. Paul my son."

He first saw his daughter-in-law the third night of his vigil.

He recognized her instantly, the smooth figure motherhood had not thickened, the loose stride. She wore a thin coat, tight about her hips. She came down the front stairs, past the street lamp before the house, her face momentarily flashing beneath the light, as though she strode across a stage. But it was nothing. It was not that which he was prepared to believe yet went on denying. He followed her to the candy store at the end of the street where she did no more than buy cigarettes and speak briefly with two middleaged men who sat at the counter smoking cigars and reading the next morning's papers. Then he followed her back to the house, and that was all.

Immediately he felt relieved. Maybe it is all a lie, he thought. Maybe they have been making up the stories. Yet at the back of his mind remained a premonition of the terrible knowledge he believed he had succeeded in evading. The next evening he was there again, already reciting to himself the easy dissuasions to which something in his blood would not succumb. It is foolish, he told himself. You could be by Seidenberg playing pinochle now. Out in the cold, a man your age. To which something within him responded instantly, without thinking, without words: It must be done. I must know once and for all.

But he had at least determined that he would not maintain his vigil beyond a week. It will be enough, he thought. If she has been doing something, I will know it by then. He stood posted in the store entrance, his collar up, wearing the glasses which heretofore he had used only for reading, since squinting into the dark all those previous evenings had strained his eyes. He did not have to wait very long. She came downstairs in the same thin coat, with the same loose stride, her hips working beneath the cloth. Again he followed her. He was not aware of

the paradoxicalness of it. All his life he had prided himself on his reputation for integrity, openness. If there was one trait he desired above any other to inculcate in his children, it was that. Yet he moved, his collar up, his hands in his pockets, in an attitude of covert, faintly sinister surveillance such as a man about to commit a crime might adopt.

There was no wind. From beyond the rooftops stars mounted upward, glittering coldly. She moved up the street without haste, yet not idly, with the unhesitating and purposeful advance of someone with a destination. He seemed to sense that. She is going somewhere, he thought. He remained a half block behind her, neither lengthening nor shortening the distance. He followed her for six blocks, a man in late middle age, tall, his shoulders full within the coat, his head erect beneath the misshapen hat. He did not see the bar until she stopped before it and turned and went inside.

The first thing he did was to stop in his tracks. He stood in the center of the empty sidewalk, sensing the quiet shock against which he had believed he'd forewarned himself. Though nothing stirred, it seemed to him a wind had begun to blow, breathing past the trivial garments against his flesh, his still organs. He could not have said how long he stood there. Neither could he have said when he resumed. From the bar neon flared in bright daubs, vivid as paint. He did not step into the light. He went carefully around it, as though it were some dark, vile pool which to so much as come near was to soil oneself. Once around the light, he stood off to the side, staring into the place through the window, past the bitten gilt lettering: AL'S BAR & GRILL. He could see people ranked along the bar; several couples, an old man hatless and in a thin jacket, three soldiers standing easily down at one end.

The light was dim, a red pale as watercolor. Behind the bar was a small quick man at whose throat a black bowtie was fixed with the undeviating rigidity of sheet steel, turning toward the cash register.

He had never been inside a bar nor had he ever more than fleetingly glanced in, in passing. Yet he seemed to have known exactly how it would appear. Looking in upon the scene, at his daughter-in-law bent forward now over the bar and speaking to the bartender, he felt a remoteness of which surprise was no part. Nor was he surprised when she turned and stood against the bar, a glass of beer raised to her lips, glancing boldly out at the others in the room, her coat open, her cheap gaudy kerchief brushed back off her hair. He seemed all at once to see clearly the self-deceit behind which he had fortified himself. I have always known it, he thought.

But he did not look away. He watched as one of the soldiers spoke to her, she in turn laughing, her head thrown back, her painted face vivid in the dim light. The soldiers were young, with lean beardless faces. They wore overseas bars on their neat tunics. He remarked at once how like his son they looked. This only made the watching more difficult. Paul, he thought. Paul. Paul. Paul. His hand resting on the wall just beyond the window had begun to tremble. He watched it with a kind of curious and unbelieving detachment, as though it were not a part of him. But he was cold again. When the hand ceased, he looked inside again. Now she was engaged in open conversation with the soldiers. She stood against the bar, her coat open, her body thrust forward. The soldiers stood watching, their faces narrowed about watching, their eyes concupiscent and still. Then one of them detached himself and came and leaned on the bar alongside her, her flaunted body. And stand-

ing there in the bitter dark where no wind blew save the one which blew against his flesh, his organs, he thought of his son immersed now in black and terrible war oblivious to both his wife's deceit and her shame. He began to curse. He stood there in the shadows, the light faintly refracted against his rigid face in which the eyes were hollow now, empty of seeing. "Bitch," he said, not speaking aloud. "Whore. May God strike you down."

So he knew at last, beyond doubt, equivocation, as his wife had feared he would know. He had stayed to the end, following them back to the house, watching them ascend to the apartment, kissing on the stairs like lovers. That had been to him the final outrage, that she should bring corruption back into the very apartment with her, into the very nuptial bed. But he said nothing to his wife. Within his mind was already paramount the plan to which he knew she would raise objections, protest against.

He maintained his vigil. No sooner would he wake in the morning than he was already looking forward to the night. He had caught cold. But he disregarded that too. His wife attempted to dissuade him from going out, but it was as if he did not hear her. He didn't even trouble to reply. Immediately upon finishing supper, as though in the same motion of taking up the last spoonful and swallowing it and putting down the spoon, he rose and went to the closet and put on his coat and the old misshapen hat, oblivious to the dead silence that fell upon the room, the battery of uplifted, still faces. His course to his daughter-in-law's house was now unthinking and direct. He stood in the shadows of the store entrance, wracked with coughing; a man in late middle age who by dint of years alone was entitled to some respite, quietus. He put it that way: At

my age a man should already be able to rest, to sit quietly. But not once did the thought enter his head that he leave and return home.

He waited. He was waiting now for his daughter-in-law to leave the house for an entire evening. This occurred on the third evening after he had seen her with the soldier. He knew she was leaving for the entire evening the moment he saw her. Instead of the thin coat she wore one of fur, a sort of mouton, and a small round hat instead of the kerchief. She walked rapidly, passing down the stairs and beneath the street-lamp, her footfalls sounding along the street. Though he knew she went to meet a man, his feeling was one of exultation. He did not follow her. He watched her figure diminish along the street, against the darkness, still hearing her footfalls for a time after he could no longer see her. He was already impatient. Still, he waited fifteen minutes longer. Good, he thought, Good; thinking: She would not come back now for anything, even if the house should burn down. Filth. He stepped from the shadows, looking both up and down the street, as though he believed himself observed, his face obscured by the down-pulled brim. Then he crossed to the house.

The hallway was cold. In the air hung the odors of food, mingled and unidentifiable and with a common rancid quality. There was a ceaseless murmur of noise; radios, the sound of voices, doors slamming. The noise enclosed him as he mounted the stairs, moving upward with him, murmuring beyond the walls. But he paid it no heed. The first time he had been to the house its air of shabby and slattern living had shocked him. Now he did not even think of it. Nor did he think of that first visit, of his son in whose face he had seen clearly and all at once the doom which he had believed simple love and ex-

pectation would be sufficient to ward off. He thought of nothing now except the swiftness of his stride, of his legs which seemed to move of their own accord despite his desire to go more slowly, to appear more casual. Otherwise they will notice me, he told himself. Nonetheless he mounted to the third floor so rapidly he had to pause for breath. He stood leaning on the bannister, his heart pounding, his breath going ah-hah ah-hah, his glasses a little fogged. When he had rested long enough to catch his breath he went along the hallway to his daughter-in-law's apartment.

He came to the door and listened, his head bent toward it. He could hear nothing from beyond the door, though about him continued the familiar murmurous sounds. In his coat pocket was a skeleton key. It was not a particular skeleton key, since he knew the lock was so simple no particular skeleton key was needed to open it. The key had been lying around the house for years. He felt for it with one hand, looking up and down the hallway.

The first few times the key would not work the bolt, clicking inside the lock distinctly and futilely. There came into his face an expression of utter bewilderment, as though out of all the imponderables and the possibilities for disaster the one thing he had not foreseen was that the key would not work. A kind of panic seized him and he thought, What will I do now? He believed he had to get out of the hallway at once, that if he remained a moment longer someone would open a door and know at once what he was at and call the police. He looked up and down the hallway, his face harried beneath the hatbrim, his breath going rapidly. Then he bent, working the key again. It had not occurred to him that the door might be open to begin with, that if she could leave the child alone

for an entire evening with no safeguard other than a neighbor's casual promise to look in, she would not even trouble to see that the door was locked. It was as though desperation were sagacity. All at once he ceased and rose up and turned the knob. The door gave, and he thrust it open and stepped inside.

He did not find the child at once. Though he left the door open through which fell a long oblong of light, and though he had been in the apartment several times before and so believed he knew it as well as his own, he blundered in the dark. He did not put on the light, thinking it would give him away, not thinking of the open door. They will see it from down in the street, he thought. He blundered twice against pieces of furniture of whose shapes he could determine only angles and corners, feeling his way like a blind man. At last he found the crib. There hung about it a cloud of infant odors, sweat and urine and baby powder, as distinct as if he could see it. Ahh, he thought. Ahh. He bent. Now he moved unerringly. He reached down into the odors, the crib, and lifted the invisible child and fondled invisible blankets about and under him without waking him. It seemed now that he could see the child, that subtle accommodation of sight to what is felt and known, and he stood a moment musing upon him, contemplative not just of the child but of the entire course of events that had led to the child and to this moment. Home, he said without speaking. I am taking you home.

So it was not surprising that at first the voice seemed to come to him as from a great distance. "I told you," it said. It was a woman's voice, nasal, and with a tone of unwavering and triumphant insistence. "I told you I heard something. The door's open."

His first impulse was to hide. He believed there had come about the realization of his worst fears and that the police had been called and were already on their way. Motionless, the child pressed against his drumming heart, he stood watching the open door, the oblong of light across which no shadow as yet fell. Beyond the doorway the voice resumed, in the bland, inescapable tones of disaster. "Dot? Did you forget something, kid? Dot? Is that you?" He realized that his sole recourse was to flee. When a shadow fell across the doorway, he was already in motion. He met the woman at the threshold; a wide, squat figure with untidy hair, no longer young, not as young as his daughter-in-law. He thought that immediately. It is from older ones like this that she learns, he thought.

Even then it seemed to him the woman should know him since she was a friend of his daughter-in-law, and so make no alarm. Yet upon seeing him she drew back with a small gasp, involuntarily throwing up one arm as though he threatened her. "Benjy," she cried in a fast, stifled voice. But when he made no motion she grew bolder, and she said in a louder tone, "What're you doing in there? Who are you?"

"I am Paul's father," he said, paused upon the threshold, unable to decide whether to attempt courtesy and reasonableness or merely to rush past her.

The woman had not noticed the child before. Now she did notice it. "The baby!" she said. "Where're you going with Dot's baby?"

"I am the grandfather," he shouted, speaking not so much to her as to the specter of legality and order which her presence evoked. "I am the baby's grandfather!"

At his words she quieted. She regarded him. What had been alarm in her soft wide face now became cunning. "Yeah,"

she said. "I've heard about you. Dot's told me a few things about you."

"I am taking him to my house," he said. "It is warmer there."

"Did Dot tell you?" she said. "She didn't tell me nothing about it."

But he had already started past her. She did not yield, staring out of a face insolent and cold. Her mouth opened into a small black hole from which screaming erupted. "Benjyl Benjyl!" she cried. "Come here!"

He continued past her, her voice shrill against his ear. The hallway was at once alive with violent sound; voices called into the broken quiet. He was almost running. He was a big man and he moved awkwardly, without grace, upon his face beneath the hatbrim an expression half of indomitability and half of alarm. When he was almost to the stairs a man interposed himself. He was short but with thick arms, wearing only an undershirt, and in slippers. From behind, the woman continued to scream. "Stop him. Stop him. Kidnapper!" she cried.

He did not falter. He had come too far. To every course of action there is an invisible line which, once crossed, renders what has gone before irrevocable, so that a man might as well go on as cease. He bore down upon the other. Perhaps the other saw something in his face. Perhaps he had made some last minute assessment of his size and had decided the gambit was not worthwhile. Because instead of meeting him headon as he came, the other stepped aside at the final moment and instead caught him by the arm. They struggled for a moment, strangers to each other, in a hallway shrill with sound. He glared upon the other, crying: "He is my grandson. My grandson I tell you!" Then he broke loose, striking one last clumsy blow at the other, who struck clumsily back, striking his

glasses from his face and knocking his hat askew. Nor did he pause then, for the glasses. He reached the stairs, fleeing down through all the uproar and halloo, the child held firmly against his breast, his body jolting with each stride.

Then it was all gone, the glare and noise, whipped away like so much smoke. Upon his face was the cold dark, the faint glitter of distant stars. He ran out into the street, sighting a car. "Taxi, taxi," he called.

When he got home his wife immediately made a bottle of warm milk for the child. Watching her busy about the stove, he thought: She has still not forgotten how. After all these years. But he could not tell from her face what she was thinking, had thought when he'd first entered with the child, his hat askew, upon his face an expression of wild and elated triumphing. Yet he should have known he would have to wait until she spoke. After being married twenty-four years he could count on one hand all the times he had been able to tell from her face what she was thinking. He fed the child in the living room, sitting in his customary chair, the child cradled in his arm. Opposite, his wife sat impassive and brusque within the clutter of her evening mending; spools of thread, scissors, the heap of worn garments. Nor did her face change while he told her of the evening, of the evenings of surveillance before and of the ultimate deed itself which was both his triumph and his revenge. Yet even as he sat he could sense, as though it were something physical, the slipping away of his triumph, his elation.

Because when he finished his wife said only: "Do you know what you have done?"

Her voice was not unkind but neither did it contain the approbation he had not realized until that moment he desired

to hear. And all at once, thinking of the outcry back at the house and of the way his wife spoke now, he saw clearly that he stood alone not only in the commission of the deed but in the assertion of its rectitude. "What do you mean, do I know?" he cried.

"It is not your child," his wife said. "You had no right to do it."

"He is our grandchild," he said. "There is a part of us in him."

"There is more of her," she said.

"She is a bum, a tramp. If you had seen ——."

"She is his mother."

"She is not fit to have children," he cried. "She should be in the gutter, in filth, like herself."

But she had already softened. Into her face there came like a light the commiseration and love that in twenty-four years of marriage she had not needed words to communicate. Still, she did not slough off the old habit of directness, of dealing straight and unequivocally with what was before her. "They will come and take him back," she said quietly.

"I know," he said.

They came at two in the morning. He and his wife sat in the living-room, she behind her mending and he with the child. He heard first the abrupt violent babble downstairs in the hallway and then, as it rose, the doors opening along the way and the sleep-laden voices of neighbors, and he thought of tomorrow and how the neighborhood would know and he thought, And I will have to bear this too. Then the uproar was at his door: several masculine voices and above those a single iterant female voice; infuriated, high, familiar even at that pitch. When the knocking began he half rose from his seat

but his wife stayed him with a gesture. "Sit," she said and looked once upon him, a look such as comes only from years of common travail and common joys, and she walked calmly into the sound of knocking and opened the door on it and it ceased. But the one high voice continued. It came into the room in advance of the clot of uniformed figures in the doorway, rushing out of a stark contorted face that screamed from among them: "He's got my baby. He kidnapped him. That old son of a bitch! I'll kill him. I'll cut his heart out."

The tumult had awakened his children. Earlier, they had seen him with the child, but he had told them nothing. Now they stood in the doorway of the bedroom, in nightgown and pajama, blinking against the light. He sat looking back at them, thinking that now he would have to face them too, and not only for that single tomorrow. Standing at the far end of the room, his wife saw them too. She turned. "Go back to sleep!" she said in a sharp, peremptory voice.

But her voice was almost inaudible. The girl had not ceased to scream, her voice filling the apartment and echoing beyond, out over the empty streets, the darkness. From close up, her face heavily painted and contorted with hate, she appeared almost unrecognizable. She seemed to see him only then. She lunged forward, her hands knotted into fists, only to be snared back, held by the uniformed figures at her side. She strained away as though on a leash; her body writhed and thrashed within the fur coat, her voice rose pitch above indescribable pitch.

One of the policemen seemed to be in charge. He stepped forward and spoke to his wife, who spoke back in turn. Standing that half a room length away from them, he could hear nothing but the screaming. Apparently neither could the policeman, because he turned, flushed with anger, and spoke

to the others above the screaming. "Shut her up," he said. "We've had enough of that. Shut up so we can hear what this is all about."

The screaming stopped at once, though some echo of it seemed to persist, risen to a pitch beyond hearing. The policeman turned again. "Is this woman your daughter-in-law?" he asked.

"Yes," his wife said.

"She says your husband took her child. Is that right?"

His wife stood in the neat housedress, her thimble still upon her finger, glinting in the light. Though her face was calm it had paled. "Yes," she said again.

At this he rose from the chair. Now all their eyes were upon him. He stood, an aging man in plain clean garments, holding in one arm the grandchild who, in his blind and single-minded despair, he did not realize was as irrevocably lost to him as his son. He believed at that moment he need only speak out against corruption to win the child. In his blindness he mistook the anger with which the policeman spoke to his daughter-in-law for something more. In the lamplight his face appeared harried, terrible with urgency. "Officer," he said. "You must listen. She is no good. She is cheap. She runs around with other men. She leaves the child alone. It could have an accident. Something terrible could happen to it." Now he was quite beside himself: from among the dark uniforms the savage sullen countenance of his daughter-in-law glared. "Bum!" he cried all at once, taking a step forward so that she shrunk back among the uniforms, shaking a fist at her. "Tramp! Whore! I would have strangled my son in his crib if I would have known I would see such a day. I swear it. I would have killed him in his crib."

Then he began to cry. He had always been a man of great dignity, appearing larger somehow than other men simply by the way he walked, held himself. He stood now like a child, crying quietly, his head bent, his children watching from the bedroom doorway. Watching too, his daughter-in-law seemed immediately to grow bolder. She began to shout at him, saying now in triumph and contempt what earlier she had said out of despair. "You goddamn no good old bastard," she said. "So goddamn high and mighty. Think your son's too good for me. I showed you. I'm his wife and now you can bleed for it. You can die over it. Die! Die! Die!"

And yet despair had not left her either. At the end her voice broke, ending in screaming again, in laughter which did not diminish in pitch and which had in it far less of triumph than hysteria. But the policeman in charge had already ordered her to be taken from the apartment. "Get her out of here," he said. "Get her out." Even then her screaming remained with them, rising from down in the hallway, from the street.

She was gone but there was yet one thing to be done. The policeman came across the room to him and took the child. He did not resist. The policeman did not look at him, at any of them, his face averted so they should not see it, as if so pre-occupied with taking up a half waked child and arranging blankets about it as a man would be repairing some complicated mechanism. Not looking at them he turned, holding the child in one arm, and left the apartment.

For a while after the door closed upon the policeman he stood as if listening after him, after the footfalls on the stairs. When they had ceased the silence that returned was almost audible, as though it were only another kind of sound. His wife moved first. She came and stood before him, her hands

clasped waist high before her, the thimble glittering at the end of one finger. Behind the pale, composed face which she turned up to him like a mask something stirred, but she suppressed it. In all the years they had been married she had not uttered one word of pity to him, nor had he desired it. But she spoke in the softest voice. "I could have told you it would end like this," she said.

Still he did not look at her. In the oblique glare of the lamp his face appeared more haggard than ever, his flesh the texture of putty. "I know," he said, his voice no stronger than a sigh. "All the time I knew it." Upon him remained his wife's eyes, the eyes of his children, their white soft faces arranged in ascending ovals in the doorway, suspended in some mute hiatus between bewilderment and shock, and he saw for a moment how he must appear to them, an old man bereft of his hopes and his dreaming and his very pride.

He felt ashamed. But immediately he spoke in justification of himself, of what he had done. "All right," he said. He turned, spreading his hands before him, addressing himself to them, to that within them which did not understand then but would remember and understand in the dark and inexorable days of their own woman- and manhood. "All the time I knew it also," he said. "But what can a man do?"

WOODEN NICKELS

WHEN I GOT OFF the train and the porter gave me a big smile and said, "Good mo'nin sir. It sure a fine day today," I knew this was going to be a good town for me. I don't go by the weather or how a town looks. Sometimes I'll get back on the train and take right off if the porter doesn't strike me right.

It wasn't too much of a town but I was down on my luck and you can never tell what might turn up. I've picked the location of some of my best operations that way, choosing a town at random from a map, in much the same way you pin a tail on a donkey in the party game. I tipped the porter and took a cab into town. Once you got beyond the railroad flats the town looked better. I sat back, the sun at my back, watching the streets flow by. I can still remember when I had to hike it into towns from the freight yards, or from off the highway when I was lucky enough to get a hitch; dogs growling at me from behind fences, people turning and staring at me. This way is better.

A distance beyond, bearing away from the station, we turned into a broad, treelined street. On either side were broad, fine houses set back from the sidewalks upon dark lawns, dappled with sunlight. So now I knew where the money was. I hadn't

expected there would be that much of it in a town this size, but then there are all those for whom a big city is good enough to make their money out of but they wouldn't want to have to live there. I was glad to see it but at the same time I've been through enough towns to know sections like this are not on the same side of town as the railroad and so I was getting a real tour when all I asked was to get to the main drag. But that's all right. The day a cab driver or anyone else for that matter stops trying to make an extra buck out of what he's already getting paid to do, that's when I'll believe the moon is made of green cheese.

Finally we made it to the center of town. Within sight of the courthouse were one big hotel called the Imperial Manor and two smaller ones, all three no more than tall old frame houses except that the Imperial Manor was whiter and had a bigger front lawn. I told him the best hotel in town so he pulled up to the Imperial Manor. I wasn't exactly flush but it's always a good investment to appear as if you have it and that you're used to staying at the best places. Which I am, since I have come to learn it doesn't take much to make a buck and you can always have a good time spending it. A bellhop came out for my bags and I registered and bought a copy of the local paper at the cigar stand in the lobby. They had one or two Kansas City papers but I didn't want one of those. I took a room facing out on the street and went up and showered and read the paper through, looking for an angle I could use. All these local papers are alike, just as all these small towns are, more or less. All about who got engaged and who died and what church is having a supper or something.

I saw the angle right away but I didn't jump at it. It's been a long time since I've jumped at anything. I went through

the paper slow and easy, not hurrying things, since an hour one way or the other wasn't going to make much difference. Then I sat a while at the window, looking down into the street over which dust lay as snow would and men in jeans and broad hats against the sun stood around or moved in no direction in particular. Just like a small town.

I went back to the paper. I have no qualms about stating that death is a time of limitless opportunity for me. I look at it this way. We are all going to die one day or another and if people are going to be so foolish as to permit the occasion to blind them to the normal exigencies of looking out for yourself and keeping your senses about you, then I want to be the one to profit by it. Not just the undertaker who's going to shame you into ordering a more expensive casket and more flowers and a bigger hearse with that smooth unctuous self-interest of his that hasn't once taken its eyes off the cash register. Oh no. I want a part of it too, since if you can't take care of it you don't deserve it. So when I read on the front page of this daily bugle or whatever it was called that funeral services were being held that morning for Axel Durston, I knew I was going to be visiting the widow to express my condolences.

Let me say right off that I didn't know Axel Durston from a hole in the wall. But that has never stopped me before. It was just that any man who takes up the entire front page of the local gossip sheet the day he is to be buried and taken out of sight for good and all, must have carried a good deal of weight in his time and had plenty of money. I have never yet seen them trouble to eulogize the town drunk or someone from over in the poorhouse. Durston had been in real estate here in town and owned part of a factory in Kansas City. They had that on a back page, as though it were a kind of after-

thought they just happened to remember. After about a million columns on how he'd been a civic leader and a Shriner and a deacon of his church and a member of the town council and the chamber of commerce and on the boards of all the town charities. And they'd have dragged in how he won the war too, had he been in it. The ideal American. Just like Washington and Lincoln. I figured he must have been rich but not too rich, and not too well known outside of town, which made it just right since that way they don't suspect the first stranger to pop out of nowhere to be after the cash too.

There was a picture of him, a beefy man with small eyes and a grey mustache. The picture wasn't very good and so I couldn't make out any of the details, which might have been of some help. You never know. I read the story over, a lot more carefully this time than before. Especially the part about what family he had left, which consisted of a wife here in town and a daughter who lived in Los Angeles. But there was no mention of the widow's age, which is an important detail. She wouldn't be the first rich widow I've made love to. By then it was noon. I put on a clean white shirt and my best suit. I didn't really need a shave, but I went down to the barber shop anyway. That's an invaluable source of information, the town barber shop.

This one was just across from the courthouse. When I came in there was one man in the chair being shaved and about half a dozen standing around in the doorway, which is just about the right ratio for that sort of thing. One of those in the doorway was another barber so I got right into a chair. He followed me in and I told him what I wanted. He got to work, putting on the hot towels, with the conversation in the doorway subsiding a little while they looked me over, standing there in their

dusty jeans and faded cotton shirts, glancing at me out of dusty faces. I could see them in the mirror. I swear, from Oregon to Florida, it's as if they were all stamped out by the same die. That's what makes it so easy.

It didn't take long for him to start pumping me, which was fine with me. They all have that same casual, indirect way of doing it, as though they have learned that too at barber school, along with how to use the scissors. He started by asking me how Kansas City was and of course I had to tell him I didn't come from Kansas City and he gave me that surprised, questioning look, the only response to which is tell him where I did come from. Sometimes I tell them Hades, New Hampshire, or Hades, Wyoming, and they don't blink an eye. They look so smug when they think they've gotten something out of you. I wonder how they'd look if I told them I was wanted in three states where they had my picture and fifteen where they didn't.

I told him I was from Chicago and that I was down here on business, the ones in the doorway listening now, if they hadn't been to begin with, standing quietly in a clump and looking with what appeared to be complete abstractedness down at the floor or out over the street at the courthouse but you could bet they were that attentive they wouldn't have missed a word even if I whispered. So when I mentioned in an offhand way that I was down to see Axel Durston, one of them said at once, "You kind of just missed him."

"What?" I said. "Did he leave town?"

"Yeah," he said, smirking a little. He was a young fellow, wearing heeled boots like those they wear in Texas. "He sure did. Middle of the night, in fact." He must have thought he was very funny. A regular Jack Benny.

It was the barber who made him stop, telling me about him dying in his sleep. "He was a fine man," he said.

"Sure," the young fellow said. "He threw you a big quarter every Saturday night."

That started them off again. That's the way they are. A man is not yet beneath the ground and they will begin to dispute over and sully his name and reputation. It was not exactly an argument, but they went at it for a while, with me asking an innocent question or two whenever it appeared it would flag, and that would start it all over again. He didn't shave me at all during that time, standing over me and talking across me at the others, waving the open razor he had just stropped in one hand. For a while that razor had me worried. In the course of it they brought up a number of things about Durston that only people who have lived in close proximity with a man can know; how he tipped, what he drank, what he did on such and such an occasion. I should have taken notes. Except that my memory is as good as it ever was and so I didn't lose very much, if anything. Finally he got around to finishing my shave. I threw him a quarter, so if anything happened to me he could say a few nice things about me too.

It was early afternoon by then. I didn't go directly to the courthouse. My next stop was the office of this daily bugle or whatever it was called. The town newspaper. On the whole I play things by ear but there are certain preliminary steps which are indispensable and which I have down to a routine. I went through the back issues of the past few years, looking for items about Durston that might be helpful or about the town which I could say Durston told me. It is amazing how people will accept the veracity of almost anything you tell them if you come up with just one small fact about them or their

home town which they wouldn't normally expect you to know but which you could have gotten from any one of a dozen public sources. There wasn't anything out of the run about Durston; the speeches he gave, the church and other socials he attended, bits about real estate deals he closed. But that's the stuff out of which you weave it all. Something like a bankruptcy or an affair with a woman they'd expect you to know. There was one item in an issue two months old about Durston attending a Shriners convention in Chicago. I'd picked the right town to come from without even knowing it.

At the courthouse I went through piles of deed and contracts, looking for some of Durston's. I have never forged a check in my life but that doesn't mean I haven't found the talent to duplicate handwriting a useful one. When I found a deed with a fair share of Durston's writing on it I slipped it into my pocket. The clerk was out in the hallway jawing with a friend. Yet they'll bitch and bitch about how some people have all the dough and the fine houses while they can't scrape up the next payment on their cars, as though it's coming to them because they live and breathe air. I'd like to tell them a few things. They can't even do a simple thing like taking care of a file of deeds well.

I had everything I needed then. I went back to the hotel and got things ready. I thought how if everything went according to plan I stood to make about three thousand, which is not bad for a few days' work in any town. I thought of Mrs Durston sitting back there in her house, now knowing what was in store for her. But that's the kind of a life it is, and I've had my share. I didn't know I'd be riding freights and grubbing in people's refuse for my meals when I'd be seventeen, either. I opened one of my bags and took out the portfolio and the

folder in which I kept the stock certificates. I had certificates from all kinds of firms there, some of them actually worth money. Say, about seventy-five cents. I went through them to see which I could use. I thought how a man like Durston would be more likely to invest in an aircraft company than in a uranium mine. The slow, solid kind. Like real estate. The aircraft stock I had was genuine enough, except that the company had closed shop about five years ago. Then I took out the rest of what I would need; credentials, business cards, letters on the stationery of big Chicago outfits. And on a blank sheet of paper I wrote a short note in Durston's handwriting.

It took me ten minutes to get from the hotel to where Durston lived. Had lived. I got the same cabbie only this time I was in a hurry and I let him know I knew what the score was and the only way he could have taken a straighter route to the house than he did was to fly. Sometimes you have to do that or they'll walk all over you. The house was along the broad, treelined street we'd been through earlier. It wasn't the biggest house on the street but it would do. It was late afternoon by then. The sun was already low in the sky, slanting across the lawn, and you could hear birds. I went up the walk to the front door, carrying the portfolio with all the papers. The portfolio was a new one, still smelling the way new leather does. I hadn't even had a chance to get it engraved. I had to discard the other because of the initials, which is one trouble with always having to change your name. It's a good thing I don't wear monogrammed shirts.

When I told the maid I'd come to see Durston on business she stood hemming and hawing not able to say the words that he was dead and I said to myself, That's that. I didn't actually expect to get to see the widow, it being just a few hours after

the funeral. This visit was for the record, so to speak. So I waited for her finally to tell me so I could start back to the hotel. But just then I heard a woman's voice call something from inside and a moment or so later a man came to the door and asked what I wanted and I told him and he told me about Durston dying. So I finally knew. Officially. He wasn't a servant. He wore a dark suit and looked what I have come to call 'professionally' sad, using words like "great tragedy" and "hour of bereavement," so I figured him to be the undertaker and I looked sad too. I can look sad with the best of them.

The woman called again from inside and he went back in and when he returned it was to take me in with him. That was fine with me. The sooner I got started the sooner I could clear out. How she did her mourning was her business. If less than five hours after her husband's funeral she chose to admit and talk to any stranger who happened to come along and ring the doorbell, I wasn't going to complain.

It looked as if half the town was there. That will tell you how much weight a man carried when he was alive. Every time. He led me across the room to the widow and just by the way he moved through the crowd and took a position by her chair I could tell he must have been chief pallbearer or something. She was one rich widow I couldn't have romanced even if I'd wanted to. She must have been about sixty, sitting in a hard-backed chair when there were two sofas and half a dozen or so big lounge chairs around, wearing black and straight as a ramrod. Maybe inconveniencing themselves is what reminds them they are suffering. But it was real with her. I know the genuine article when I see it.

So I said, "I'm terribly sorry. I couldn't have picked a worse time to come."

"You had no way of knowing," she said.

I let that one go by. "Allow me to offer my condolences," I said. "It must be a terrible time for you."

"Yes," she said. "Thank you." She said, "It is the Lord's to give and to take away."

Which were my sentiments exactly. That part about take away. I said something consoling and properly serious of my own. I don't know the Bible too well but what I said sounded as if it could have come from there. You would think with all the funerals I have been to I would remember some of the lines the ministers use. But they don't know the difference, anyway.

She thanked me and said, "I'm only sorry you had to make the trip from Kansas City for nothing."

"Kansas City?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "Didn't you say you came down to see my husband on business?"

"Oh," I said. "Sure. But I came down from Chicago. Not Kansas City."

That kind of surprised her. I don't know what she thought I'd come about. Maybe she thought I'd just run over to order a dozen of whatever it was her husband manufactured, or about some other niggling matter. And still she had troubled to see me. At a time like this. I was beginning to make out what kind she was. There are some who will do anything to discomfit themselves provided only it is in the name of duty or obligation or consideration for others. Probably if she were on her own deathbed and I came to trouble her about a nickel's worth of something, she would see me. She must have had a disagreement over that with the other, the chief pallbearer or whatever he was. Because she said to him, "You see. Imagine making a trip like that and then being turned away."

"You just can't see everyone," he said. And he was right. As it was she looked worn out, sitting there in that hard chair and accessible to every fool and hypocrite in town who thinks it to his advantage to come and tell her how sorry he is, when she could have been upstairs and in bed and alone. But that is what they let themselves open to.

About that time some of those who were leaving came over and she excused herself and spoke to them. She certainly had control of herself. She spoke quietly and said just the right things, as calm as if at some afternoon tea and she was the hostess. And all the time she must have been ready to break apart with grief. You hear about women like that. Like the pioneer women who when their husbands died, dug the graves themselves and read the services. But they couldn't help themselves. I don't know why she did it, bearing it like that. No one was going to give her any medals. When she was free again she asked me how long I planned to stay in town and I explained I was on an urgent business trip to Dallas and so I had intended to spend only the day. "But I didn't know about your husband then," I said. "Of course that changes things. I wouldn't want you to discuss business so soon after —."

But she didn't let me finish. "Mr. Compton was my husband's partner," she said, motioning to the other. "Maybe you could talk over your business with him. That way you wouldn't be delayed."

So he actually had been chief pallbearer. You can tell every time. But he didn't like her idea one bit. "Evelyn, how can I talk business at a time like this?" he said.

Yet if there were an easy thousand in it for him I'd like to see how fast he could not just talk business but find the office to do it in. But I didn't say anything like that. There is no point to arousing the enmity of more people than you have to.

And there are enough of those around. I told him I understood his feelings perfectly and that I could delay my trip for a day or so. I still didn't know what his game was. Assuming it was anything beyond the merely commonplace one of getting the good side of a widow who is not only rich but happens by a stroke of fortune to own the half share of a business to which you own the other half.

Finally she got around to asking me if I had a place to stay and I told her I was registered at the Imperial Manor. Right there I got my value out of the few extra bucks that room was costing me. Then she asked me at least to stay for dinner and for a while I made as if I would rather not put her through all that trouble, considering what she had been through. But there is no gainsaying them. Here she is still in black and her husband's body not yet moldering and the grief fresh in her heart, and she must sit there without a murmur and remember all the amenities because she is not only a widow but a hostess too and I am under her roof. I will never understand it. Maybe it is that they have to believe they are better and nobler than anyone else in this world or else they can't rest easy at night or look at themselves in the mirror. I know I wouldn't do it.

But she said, "You are my husband's guest, as much as if he were alive. I know how lonely it can be in a strange place, eating alone." She must have thought of her husband then, her own lonely eating; sitting there with her hands stiff in her lap, clasped one within the other, her eyes staring out into space. But I don't need her to tell me about being alone. She's never had to sleep in parked cars or railroad station waiting rooms, drifting from town to town, east and west, north and south. What did she expect, they would both die at the same stroke of midnight or something?

In the end I agreed. There had never been any doubt in my mind about that. I thought how if I stayed for dinner I might be able to swing the entire operation that evening and so be able to leave town early the next day, as soon as I cashed the check. Or maybe she would have the amount in cash right here in the house, in which case I would certainly not regret the twelve dollars that room that I wouldn't get to spend the night in had cost me. We talked a while longer and then she excused herself, as there were still a few of those around who hadn't yet come over and gotten in their ten minutes of consoling.

I went out on the porch, which was at the rear of the house. The sun was well down behind the trees by then. The sky was streaked with orange, and there was a stillness in the air. I could hear them talking inside, the murmur of their voices at my back. I lit a cigarette and stood there smoking a while, thinking how well it was going. That porter had been a good omen all right. I thought of old Axel resting quiet out there in the cemetery. He'd probably stood on this very spot, seeing the same things I was seeing, figuring out his next move in some deal just as I was. Well, the worms were having a good time anyway.

They were all gone by then and the maid came out to tell me. She looked as though she were taking it worse than the old lady. I went back in and sat with her and Compton, waiting for dinner to be ready.

"I feel a little better now that everyone's gone," she said. "We can talk about your business right after dinner."

"There's no rush," I said. "It can wait."

"That's very kind of you," she said.

"I know what a strain you've been under," I said. "What you need is a good night's rest."

"No," she said. "Some things come first. There's no reason for you to be delayed. It's not your fault that — that—."

"One day one way or the other won't matter," I said.

"Please," she said. "It's very kind of you to be so concerned. But I insist."

I could tell it was settled then and there, and she wasn't going to find me crying over it. That's just like her kind. Always worried about someone else and placing everybody's convenience and well being above her own. I didn't have to trouble with anything as elaborate as phony stock and a story about meeting her husband in Chicago. All I had to do was come and tell her my father was a drunk and my mother in the crazy house and I had sixteen brothers and sisters to provide for, and she'd throw me a thousand. I wouldn't put it past her.

We went into dinner and I was already thinking how I would have to change the story I usually told. Usually I tell them how the stock is an inside tip and it will skyrocket in no time at all, and hope their own imagination and greed will do the rest. But not her. You don't see many like her and that's a pity because I could really be living in clover. She wouldn't know what greed was if you spelled it out or gave her some to taste. Not like all those others who only act as if they are so moral and pure but at least they have sense enough to know when a dollar bill is waved under your nose you are supposed to grab at it. Oh yes. I know the genuine article all right, since it must have been my father who took out the patent. It's not every man who can fritter away a fifty thousand dollar business because he is too good and pure to undercut a competitor or lie to get a contract though all you have to do is turn your own back. It wouldn't be ethical, and neither does it matter that your wife will have to work her fingers raw and your son wear

hand-me-down clothes and not have a quarter for the movies on Saturday afternoon like other kids. And she is just his match. If I told her she could double her money on that stock by doing nothing more than holding on to it, she'd probably send me down to the local charity to let them buy it. So I thought how I'd tell her that stock was already worth more than it was costing her and the only reason I had troubled to see that her husband got it instead of myself or a friend was that I was a man of my word and I wasn't looking to make money at someone else's expense. That would do it. She would be on my side all the way, since I'd be a kindred soul. And there are those in the nut house who are giving out ten dollar bills, too.

She had a full dinner served though she didn't eat much herself. And all the time the maid looking as if she were going to break down and cry all over the table at any second. When we were through she told the maid to take the evening off. That figured. We went back into the living room and I told her what I had come to see her husband about. I had a good story about how I'd met Durston at a Shriners convention in Chicago several months back and we had liked each other and I was in stocks and bonds and I promised to let Durston in on it when I had a good tip. Every here and there I dropped in a personal bit about Durston or something about the town I said Durston told me, to make it more convincing. She sat there hanging on every word, bent forward in her seat a little, her hands quiet in her lap. He sat in his old place alongside her, not taking his eyes from me. I could see he had his doubts but I wasn't telling it for his benefit. It must have troubled him to see the way she took it all in because after a while he began to squirm in his seat, shifting his position from side to side, crossing and uncrossing his legs. Maybe he was thinking about

how there was going to be three thousand less for him to get his own hands on.

When I got through he hopped on me. "You mean that stock was worth more than three thousand when you got it?" he said.

"No," I said. "It went up a few days later. They told me when I called the office."

"How long ago was that?" he said. He acted as though he were giving me the third degree. Well, I've been through that before too, and I've held my own with better ones than him.

"Yesterday," I said. "When I was in Kansas City."

"I suppose you have the papers to prove who you say you are," he said.

He was about to go on like that but she leaned over and touched his arm. "Henry," she said, looking into his face.

"That's all right," I said. "Mr. Compton is only looking out for your interests, and I wouldn't expect less. After all, three thousand dollars is not just something you tip the delivery boy."

I could afford to say that. I have never yet met one of them who not only was incapable of looking after his own interests, but he will fight anyone who tries to do it for him. I guess they think self interest is a crime. And if it were I couldn't think of but three or four who would be walking around outside of jail, and she and my father would be in the front ranks. I opened the portfolio and took out the papers and the stock certificates. If he wanted to see papers, I could show them to him. He looked them over carefully, as though he actually knew what to look for in order to tell if they were genuine or not. One thing I'll say for myself. The president of the company himself couldn't tell. And when I brought out the note in Durston's handwriting requesting the stock, even Compton didn't have a word to say.

She cried a little over the note, seeing what she took to be her husband's handwriting. I took that for a good sign. "I'm terribly sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to reopen wounds that haven't even healed."

And Compton fussing over her, patting her hands and asking how she felt as though he were really concerned. Well, he wasn't fooling me. I must have stepped on his toes because he threw me some hard looks in between his fussing. He kept asking her if she wanted a glass of water or something but he didn't get up for it since it was plain he didn't trust me out of his sight even for the time it would take him to get to the kitchen and back. He must have been sorry the maid was gone. I am surprised he even went on blinking his eyes.

After a while she composed herself. "Will a check do?" she said. Just like that. I don't think she looked even once at the papers. Except for the note. This one had been as easy as falling off a log.

"A check will do fine," I said.

"If you can't wait the extra day, I might be able to get it for you in cash," she said.

"The extra day?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "The banks are closed tomorrow, you know."

I didn't know. Talk about frustration and a turn of luck. Here I was as good as on my way with the check in my hand, and then something like this. It seemed tomorrow was some kind of town holiday and the banks were closed for the day. They close at the drop of a hat out here. It has always been my belief that there is an inverse ratio between the size of a town and the number of things they celebrate. In a town like this I guess I should be thankful the banks were open at all. But I only said I still had that trip to Dallas and I would prefer to leave as soon as possible, now that it had been settled.

Not that I wouldn't wait if I had to. I have waited a lot longer for less than that in my time. But you can never tell what might come up to give you away. Like someone else arriving who claims he is a friend of Durston and that he met him in Chicago and Durston asked him to pick up some stock or real estate or whatever for him. It's been known to happen.

She said she thought she could have the cash for me by late morning and she would call me at the hotel. That was fine with me. I got ready to go then. It was still early but I had done what I came here to do and I didn't want to wear out my welcome. I got all my papers together and put them back into the portfolio. My hat was on a table at the far end of the room, but I didn't take that. When I was through I shook hands and thanked her for her hospitality. I put it on thick, since if it was going to cost her three thousand dollars she ought to get something for her money.

She ran true to form to the end. She couldn't get up herself but she wanted Compton to accompany me to the door. I guess that's one of the things that keeps them up at night, not fulfilling what they conceive to be their obligation and duty, which takes in a lot of territory. But I talked her out of it, insisting it was all right and that I could find my own way. I knew what I was doing. And Compton sitting there, looking from one to the other of us, and I could tell whose side he was on. It must have killed him, sitting there most of the evening just waiting for me to leave so he could get her alone and out of my hearing.

When I got to the front door I actually went out through it, slamming it behind me. First I made sure the lock was off, though. I stood there on the front stairs for a minute or so, listening to the crickets and the sound of the wind in the trees,

giving him a little time inside. I had a hunch about him. I don't like to sneak up behind closed doors and eavesdrop on conversations any more than the next man but sometimes there is no help for it. I would be a damned fool not to find out which way the wind was blowing so I don't walk back tomorrow into a roomful of law officers ready to tick off all the wanted bulletins on me hot off the teletype, with him standing there in the middle and laughing his head off.

When I thought he'd had enough time to warm up I went back in, not making a sound. Let them catch me there in the hallway. There is nothing wrong that I know of with someone coming back for his hat and not making a racket about it. If they chose to be ungracious and begin talking about me the minute I turned my back and stepped out of the room, that was their look out.

They did. The first thing I heard when I came back into the hall was him saying, "But you didn't have to give him the money."

"I know," she said.

"That note doesn't constitute a contract," he said. "There's no way he can make you take the stock if you don't want to." He went on to me then, running me down, and I just waited for him to come up with just one thing I had overlooked or slipped up on. But he couldn't. Because when she asked him outright if he thought I was dishonest the best he could do was hem and haw and tell her he really couldn't say but he had his suspicions. That's what I thought. I will put in for social security the day I stop being able to connive and outsmart ones like him. With one hand tied behind me. But he wouldn't give up. Maybe he wanted that three thousand as bad as I did. "Isn't being suspicious enough?" he said. "If you're walking

down an empty street at night you don't wait for the man who's been following you to take out a mask and gun before you start running."

But she would. That's where I had him beat. Her kind is so worried about wronging someone else, they won't lift a finger to protect themselves until it's too late. If they do at all. Sure enough, she began to tell Compton about how distrust breeds distrust and evil, evil, sounding as good as any of those ministers I have heard, any day. Except that she believed it. She told him that if I were who I said I was I would never do another favor the rest of my life if she treated me like that after all the trouble I had been through, going out of my way to get the stock and then to drop it off. She needn't have worried about that, though.

With her going on like that I knew everything was going to be all right. I once read about a woman who was robbed and stabbed to death and she didn't raise a hand to defend herself, she just said, "May God forgive you." I guess they must have been sisters. I figured I could leave then so I edged back along the hall and out the door. I didn't make a sound, quiet as a good second storey man. Sometimes I think I have not made full use of my talents. I went back to the hotel, feeling good about the way it had all worked out. I could as good as feel that money in my pocket. I didn't think I was being ungrateful, taking her money after the way she had treated me and stood up for me, because she will get her reward anyway. In heaven. That's all that matters to them, knowing they can go to bed at night with a clear conscience, even if they haven't got a cent and their wife has left them and their son has got to grub food from the neighbors. Morality; honesty; principle. That's what they call it, when all along it is no more than cutting your nose

to spite yourself. Well, if thinking how pure and noble and what a good Samaritan they are is all they care about, they are welcome to it. I'm not going to take it away from them. It didn't take me long to get back to the center of town. They roll the sidewalks in at eight but I managed to find a place that was still open. I had a few beers and went up to my room. I was glad about that. I'll take a twelve dollar room to sleeping in an empty car or some crummy railroad waiting room, any day.

She told me she would call about twelve the next day, so I took my time getting out of bed. After I dressed I got all my things packed and called the station about the next train to Kansas City. I could take a plane out of there but I didn't know yet where to. Maybe I should have asked her where she had relatives. I was sitting in the lobby reading a magazine when the call came. I needn't have been so anxious. It was Compton and he told me she wasn't feeling so well and that she had run into a little trouble getting the full amount. Right away I smelled something but he said she would have it for me positively by three o'clock, which was still all right. That train for Kansas City didn't leave until 4:02 and so I still had enough time, even if it were all in one dollar bills and I had to count it.

But after I hung up and thought about it I still smelled something. I have learned enough to know you cannot take what a man says at face value, when money is involved. If they were going to set up and prepare something for me, I wanted to know about it. In advance. I don't like surprises, especially the kind I had gone through all that trouble last night to forestall. So I got a cab and went out to the house then and there, having him stop about a block up the street. But

even from that far I could see the car before the house with that big gold sheriff's star on its side.

I sat there a minute, thinking what to do and how Compton must have arranged it on his own hook because I had heard them last night and there was nothing he could have found out in so brief a span that would make her change her mind. She must have given him a time, seeing the sheriff's car pull up to the house. I can imagine him trying to explain it to her, pulling that long face of his. But then, he probably told her some cock and bull story about how it is for her own good and she will believe it, taking him at his word. And even if she didn't, at least he had an ally now. What she doesn't know is that he probably pays half the sheriff's salary. And her husband paid the other half. Well, they didn't have anything on me and maybe I could even outbluff him for a while, but he was playing on his home field and I didn't feel like bothering to answer a lot of stupid questions or getting roughed up. They do that too. Maybe I am getting old. But if they finally do get me it won't be some two bit hick sheriff in a hick town like this. I would never live it down.

So I told the cabbie to get me back to the hotel and I had my bags brought down. It was hot standing in the sun and I thought how not only had I failed to get the money, but the effort had cost me a good hat. Next time I'll leave some old chewing gum wrappers behind to come back for. Her kind would believe it too. All I have to do is look innocent enough. And then they are appalled by all the what they call evil they see in the world when all the time they are as good as promoting it, trusting every stranger they meet and as good as handing out gilt-edged invitations. They might just as well hand out their money on some street corner. It would save everyone

a lot of trouble. I have always said, if you are going to leave a door open it won't be long before someone walks through it.

I got out to the station in good time and they told me the next train was due in about ten minutes and it was bound for Albuquerque. I have always wanted to see Albuquerque this time of year. Or any place else, for that matter, the train for which would get me out of here in ten minutes, with him back there talking to the sheriff. I don't know positively if he was after the money too, though with a face like his I wouldn't put it past him. But one thing I know. If it wasn't him then it will be someone else, and I am only sorry it couldn't be me. I got another porter this time. He was polite and he smiled all the time and he made a big to do about handling my bags just right, the same as the one who decided me to stay over. I didn't tip him though. I figure it will take the better part of two months, but I will get back every cent of the price of that hat all their smiling and politeness has cost me, even if I have to carry my bags myself.

THE PAPER IT IS PRINTED ON

ALL ALONG HE had known how it would turn out. He thought that, coming out of his brother's house and descending the stone steps two at a time, outdistancing his wife and child. When he came to the foot of the steps he paused and glanced back, beyond his wife who stood yet on the porch, bent over the boy, straightening his hat and coat. At the window, among the curtains, he saw for a moment his brother's face, fleeting, inscrutable, almost the face of a stranger. Well, I can't help that, he thought turning away. It isn't my fault.

He waited upon the sidewalk for his wife. The day was cold; brilliant and hard. The new trees, ranked at the curb up and down the street, stood against the empty sky thin as pencils. He waited with a kind of furious impatience, glaring out over the new street, the new brick houses almost identical in facade and tone, neat, upon neat repetitive plots, with even the children's toys in the driveways and upon the lawns brief as flags, scattered with a kind of deliberate unconcern as in a movie setting. Sure, he thought, seeing a tricycle here, a toy gun, a baseball glove there. They don't have to worry about money. What the hell do they care if someone comes along and steals a bike or something. They just go out and buy another.

He did not wait for his wife to come up to him. When she reached the foot of the steps he resumed again, turned and

went to the car at his short, fierce gait and sat behind the wheel. She'll have time enough to get at me in the car, he told himself, watching her approach at the child's pace, the two figures, the short and the tall, advancing almost without progress through the thin winter sunlight. He looked away, straight before him. Before him in the driveway stood his brother's car, a new Oldsmobile, glinting the sunlight from its highly polished and immaculate surfaces. Perhaps he thought only then how he could look nowhere along this street without seeing the clear and palpable evidences of that level of existence abundant in money, assured with success. He thought of his own car. It was a second hand Ford, for which he had paid three hundred dollars and which had permitted him not one tranquil week in all the time he had owned it. He thought of it on this street, in the driveway behind his brother's new car, as it must appear to those who stood and mused inscrutably upon it from their front porches, from behind half drawn blinds. It must look like an old bum on Park Avenue, he thought. But the next instant he spoke aloud. "Then damn them too," he said fiercely, addressing no one in particular, seated rigidly behind the wheel awaiting his wife and son.

They came across the lawn. The car was a two door model. His wife pulled the seatback forward and held it while the child clambered into the back, then she got in beside her husband amid a sibilant flurry of coat and skirt and slip and awkward legs. She arranged herself upon the seat, then sat and looked at him. "I suppose now you're satisfied —," she began.

"Just don't say a word," he said harshly, barely able to speak the words, to control himself. He did not look at her. "Just wait," he said. "It's a long ride home. You'll get your chance."

He bent and turned the key. He had to turn the engine over

three times before it finally caught. He cursed softly and steadily at the car. He backed it out of the driveway and onto the street with abrupt and furious disregard, then wheeled it about and drove it fast down to the parkway.

He drove west out of Bellemore, back to the city. The noon winter sun stood above the parkway, directly before them. The weekday traffic was sparse, moving swiftly past the intermittent, increasing clutter of new home developments, the peaceful streets of older towns. His wife sat quietly, looking out upon the parkway. In one corner in back the child sat, his legs stuck straight out before him; bemused, motionless as a doll. After a while his wife said, "Is it all right with your royal highness if I say something now?"

"You'll say it anyway, whether it's all right or not," he said.

"That's all right," she said. "I couldn't do any worse than you did today."

"What do you mean, any worse?" he said. "What was I supposed to do, let him walk all over me again? That's the way it's always been and I'll be goddamned if it's going to again."

His voice had risen. "Don't yell at me," she said dryly. "I don't have two thousand dollars."

He drove on in silence and after a while he calmed. He sat hunched toward the wheel, staring straight before him while about him town and parkway and field sped in unceasing retrograde. In the back the child stirred. His wife turned and spoke to him. After he was quiet again she turned and once more straightened herself upon her seat. The parkway curved out from under the sun, to the left. "You know, you didn't have to get so excited and insult him in his own home," she said.

"He takes that tone with me and I'll insult him any damn place in this world," he said.

"That's the way he is," she said. "He's a lawyer and he can't forget it."

"He doesn't let anyone else forget it either," he said. "If he wants to play lawyer let him save it for the courtroom."

"You don't help matters either, when you get like that," she said.

"Like what?" he said. "Get like what?" He turned and glared at her.

"Calm and collected, the way you are now," she said. "Watch the road."

"I am watching the road," he said. He said, "Calm and collected, eh? Just like that." Again his voice rose. He sat directly behind the wheel, hunched toward it, the sun on his face. "You expect me to stay calm and collected when a man goes and tells me a thing like that, knowing my circumstances? He's got twenty times as much money as I have and he tells me it's only fair we split what it'll cost right down the middle. You heard him. Fifty-fifty. Suddenly he's fifty-fifty with me, when he's got a new house and a car and he spends more in a week on just drinks and cigars than I spend on my whole family in a month."

"He's your father too," she said quietly, gently.

"My father too," he said after her. But in his voice there was a harshness, a jarring quality bitter and ironic both. "I'm glad you reminded me," he said. "I almost forgot."

"You shouldn't talk like that," she said.

"No?" he said, looking at her, turning upon her an expression of sardonic and mock incomprehension. "Why not?" he said. "Give me one good reason why not."

She looked at him. There was nothing at all in her face when she spoke. "There you go again," she said. "That's what I mean. The way you are now, if you're interested."

"What about the way I am now?" he said.

"If they were giving a prize for the easiest and the most pleasant person in the world to talk to, right now you would be a walkaway."

"They don't give prizes for that," he said. "Haven't you heard? They give them to sons who work fathers for everything they can get and then yell fifty-fifty when the old man needs help."

"All right," she said. "Then you would get second prize."

"What the hell do you mean by that crack?" he said. He stared at her.

"Nothing at all," she said. "It's just that since *you're* being so generous and openhearted about all this, you ought to get something too."

He sat staring at her, his face empty and still. "That's not fair," he said at length.

"Watch the traffic," she said, not looking at him. She sat in the corner, against the door, her hands folded upon her lap.

"That's not fair and you know it," he said.

"I know," she said. She did not look at him. "I'm sorry I said it."

But he was no longer listening. He sat facing forward, rigid within his worn overcoat and suit, within the small shabby car which in ten years had been his one indulgence and which now had become only one further source for his despair; his face still, intent, as though fixed upon some sudden and invisible point, as though he could see all at once the meaning and outcome of his life.

"Everything I have ever had in this world I have had to sweat and grub for," he said. He spoke without turning, into the windshield, his voice choked with bitterness. "I have never known an easy penny in my life, while he is making money

hand over fist as easy as if all he has to do for it is take the trouble to bend to pick it up. And I'm supposed to match him cent for cent."

Then he turned and glared upon her; above the shirt and tie and upturned coat collar his face was aggrieved and wild with outrage. But she only said, "You'll scare the baby. You're shouting."

"Yes, I'm shouting," he said, no longer able to control his voice. "I'm shouting all right. What did you expect, when a man makes me a proposition like that? Singing? Just four thousand dollars he says, and the old man's taken care of for the rest of his life and you can put your mind at rest. Put my mind at rest. From what? I don't have a guilty conscience. I don't owe anything I haven't already paid back five times over, and so I'm quits even if I don't give a goddamn cent."

She sat without moving. Yet for an instant there was in her manner something of hesitation, delay. Then it was gone. She said, "That's not the idea."

He looked at her with cold eyes. "No?" he said. "Then what is? Tell me what the idea is."

But she did not reply at once, seated with her hands upon her lap, looking out at the increasing traffic. In the sky there blew tatters of grey cloud. They were approaching the city now, moving through the small, clotted towns just outside, the parkway growing dense with cars, and he said, "All right. I'm calmed down. See, I'm not shouting. Now tell me, since you know so much. What is the idea?"

"He's an old man and he's alone," she said looking straight before her.

He laughed once, harshly. "Is that all? Tell me something I don't know," he said.

She went on as though he had not spoken. "It's a pity to see him like that, in that miserable tenement," she said. "It's not as if he has no one."

"He hasn't," he said. "He's got one son and he's too busy counting his money."

"What are you?" she said. "You're a son too."

"I am?" he said. "You could have fooled me."

"Never mind the wisecracks," she said. "I'm serious."

"What the hell do you think I am?" he said. "Did you think I was having a barrel of fun?"

"He's an old man and he can't take care of himself any more," she said. "You can't leave him like that."

"No?" he said. "Why not? My brother can. You heard him. He says he's strapped for cash. He can't make it without my share, he says, so it's fifty-fifty or nothing. I feel real sorry for him. He must be down to his last hundred thousand. Maybe I ought to go out and take up a collection for him."

Yes, he thought. And I will contribute the first nickel. But his wife said, "That's got nothing to do with you, how much he wants to give or not give."

"Oh?" he said. "That's right," he said. "I forgot. It doesn't matter at all to me whether my share is one thousand or two or even four thousand, because my middle name is Rockefeller and Morgan and so what the hell is a few thousand one way or—."

"That's not what I meant," she said.

"No? Then say it again so I can figure out what you did mean," he said. "I didn't know a simple English sentence could mean that many things."

She sat looking at him. In her lap were the black cloth gloves she had worn earlier. She sat holding the gloves, thwarted, yet

with a pertinacity that in its physical aspect gave her an appearance something like his own. They had already entered the city. The parkway curved now between ocean and empty marsh. In the distance a haze hung over the land, blurring the sky. Within the haze stood building upon building in myriad accumulation. He was driving slowly, in the slow lane. A constant stream of cars passed them, their occupants no more than glancing at the shabby car, at the man and woman seated in front as in any other car.

After a while she said quietly and determinedly: "You have to get your father into that nursing home. He can't go on living like that, all alone, not able to take care of himself. If you don't, you'll be sorry later on."

"Why? Do I owe him something?" he said. "Is there something I forgot to pay back?"

She did not look at him. "He did the best he could for you," she said.

He laughed, harshly, without mirth, throwing his head back. "He did, didn't he?" he said. And he launched at once into a harangue against his father. He repeated how his father had always favored his brother when they were young, the remembrance of which still rankled after so many years and which he had not forgiven him. Of the myriad petty injustices he had endured at his father's hands, he said nothing at all. It was that his brother had been permitted to go to college and he had not, that symbolized for him the bitterness and frustration of his lot. His wife sat looking down at her gloves.

"So he made a mistake," she said. "He meant well."

"That's right," he said. "He meant so well he took me into the shop with him so I could learn a trade, and so today I'm a cutter and my brother's got a new house and wears hundred

dollar suits." And when his wife made no response to that he said, "For me there was no money, but Harold, he was the smart one, the genius. He didn't worry about money when Harold said he wanted to go to college. Every damn thing for Harold. What the hell was I? A stepson? Well, he has his Harold all right and I hope he's satisfied."

Still his wife remained silent. The sun stood directly above them now, at the height of day. He came to his exit and drove off the parkway, up Flatbush Avenue into Brooklyn, expecting his wife to speak at any moment. Before they came among sidewalks and houses they drove through an expanse of empty land, neither field nor marsh, in which tall weeds grew. He watched his wife from the corner of his eye. When he had all but concluded she would not speak again before they got home, she said: "So you're going to outdo your brother at last."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" he said.

"You ought to know," she said. "It's in simple English."

"Listen," he said, his voice louder than he had intended. "Ever since we left my brother's place you've been on my back, and I'm getting tired of it. All you do is criticize me and make remarks and not a word about my brother. Whose wife are you anyway?"

"Do you want that in simple English too?" she said, facing him.

But he had been badgered enough. He believed his wife should have known that from his voice alone. But she had not desisted. He glared upon her, his hands rigid upon the wheel, his face rigid. "Now look—," he said.

"No, you look," she said. She faced him squarely, half turned in her seat: the square, plainly dressed woman whom neither he nor the derangements of circumstance had ever

cowed and who had always told him the truth about himself, seated with one hand on her hip and upon her face an expression harshly and invincibly determined. "I've been married to you for twelve years now," she said in a flat, unraised voice, deliberate as blows. "It hasn't all been honey and roses but I have no complaints. I'm satisfied. It's been a good marriage and you have been a good husband, because you are a decent man. I am not just flattering you. I'd tell you the other just as plainly too, if it were the truth. That's why it hurts me to hear you talk like this, about how you won't lift a finger. You sound just like your brother. So now you know whose wife I am. Anyway. And let me tell you one more thing. The day I stop criticizing you is when you ought to begin to worry. Because that will be the day when I don't care any more what you are or what you will become or do to yourself, as I do now. Now see if you can get your son upstairs without waking him."

They were home. He followed his wife across the sidewalk to the apartment house entrance, going over what she had just said. His son slept upon his shoulder. Ahead, his wife nodded and spoke to a neighbor in passing. When he came up to her she held open the massive iron and glass front door while he passed into the hallway. Yes, he thought wryly, almost tranquilly. She told me off all right. He felt almost contrite. But they hadn't even reached their apartment when he became angry again. What am I supposed to do? he thought. Just lay down and play patsy and that's the end of it? The more he considered such a course the angrier he became, until he saw it as nothing more than an outrageous imposition to which he was opposed on principle alone, as contrary to all he felt and believed, and though he had not retorted to his wife

downstairs in the car, it did not mean he had acceded. Oh no, he thought. Not by a long shot.

And he felt again as he had in his brother's house. Again he recapitulated the arguments he had used earlier, and some additional ones he had thought of on the way home. He thought: I'll be damned if I'm going to spend the rest of my life in a shop on account of them, cutting dresses, taking crap from foremen. "Fifteen years is enough," he said.

His wife stood before the door and searched her purse for the key. "What?" she said. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," he said. "I didn't say a thing."

"I heard you say something."

But she dropped it, and he entered with the child and went directly to the bedroom. There were two bedrooms. Theirs was the larger and it was there the crib was kept while the two girls, who were older, slept together in the other. Beyond the window the day was brilliant. Sunlight glared from distant rooftops, and against the house stood a tree whose bare boughs clattered one upon the other when wind blew. He placed his son upon the bed, on the satin bedcover his wife forever insisted he turn back. What she doesn't know won't hurt her, he told himself. His son lay upon the bed, inert, his head lolling, his hands at his sides, palms upward. He began clumsily to undo his clothing. With clumsy, uneven motions and waste motions, he fumbled off each garment in its turn; hat, scarf, coat, leggings.

But he could not put the morning from his mind. He believed his position to be unassailable, based upon the simple, immemorial premise of equity, of returning favor for favor, disfavor in like measure. Yet apparently the elaborate and buttressed superstructure of his arguments did not satisfy

him, because even then he continued to go over the morning in his mind, justifying and justifying. What the hell is the matter with me? he thought irritably. Nevertheless he resumed the dialogue he had carried on with his wife earlier, except that now he spoke both parts, himself and himself.

You don't have any feelings, he said.

It isn't a question of feelings.

No? Then what is it a question of?

Principle. It's a question of what's fair is fair.

Ah, fair.

Yes. A man makes his bed and sleeps in it. After the way he treated me he has no right to expect anything.

All right. He doesn't expect anything, then.

He should. But not from me. He's got another son. My brother owes him a little more than I do.

Yes, owes. Because they keep books about things like this and mark it all down, the credits in black, the debits in red. Is that what you believe?

No, he told himself. But that's what they ought to do. Someone should. They should!

Then he ceased. All at once he became aware of the sound his breathing made; in echo came his son's mild, orderly suspiration. He stood bent over his son, still with his coat on, the suit and tie he wore only for visiting; holding in one hand his son's last trivial garment. What the hell was I doing? he thought to himself.

He came to himself. In the kitchen his wife clattered dish-ware and silver, preparing the afternoon meal. He put the garment down with the rest. He lifted the child and carried him across the room to the crib which stood against the far wall, upon which sunlight now fell in broad bars. He lay him

in the crib. He stood so a moment, resting on the side of the crib, the sunlight falling upon him. Beyond the window wind blew; the calls of children rose and faded on the wind, dying away. "My son," he said quietly. He had three children and his son had been the last and he was almost two years old. Yet he spoke the words as if for the first time. He stood above the crib as if for the first time. So might his father at one time have stood above him. He thought that. He thought of his father as he had been then, and as he was now. Not moving, his head bent a little in an attitude of listening, it seemed to him he could hear at last, after half his life had run out, the actual elapse of time. He saw time: once he had attended a meeting in a strange building and he had been left behind and had blundered along corridor after dark corridor. Time was like that: a dark, irrevocable corridor whose twists and turns he could not foretell or see, at the end of which no light shone.

Yet it was as if a light suddenly shone for him. It was as if, suddenly, he could see a great distance down the corridor, to its uttermost shadows. Bent above his son, not four feet from the bed on which his son had been conceived, he spoke the truth simply and quietly. "He won't need me," he said. "He'll grow up and become a man and he won't need me. He might not even like me."

At that moment he felt sorry for himself. In feeling sorry for himself, he felt sorry for his father. He stood a moment longer beside the crib, his head bent, his hands on the railing. He knew at last what he must do. He turned and went to the dresser and rummaged in the top drawer among his socks and ties and handkerchiefs. He thought of what he had contemplated doing, and of what he was going to do now. "What the hell could I have been thinking about?" he said. He searched

wildly, unsystematically, spilling socks and handkerchiefs upon the floor. It took him several minutes to find the bank book. By that time his cantankerousness and outrage had returned. He stood above the drawer's wild disarray, contemplating the bankbook, the brief pages filled with neat rows of cumulative entry upon entry, which together symbolized the easier life to which he aspired, and his struggle toward it. Standing so, the years, events, actual voices, came back to him, and he spoke suddenly. "It's not fair," he said, aloud, startled at the pitch and harshness of his own voice, thinking: There is no justice in the world. And he began to swear in that voice which was like another's, his hands clenched into fists, himself facing himself in the mirror. "God damn it all to hell," he said. "Damn. Damn. Damn."

But his resolve did not weaken. One bastard in the family is enough, he thought. He now saw himself as having been doomed to his role and part from the outset, from which he would derive no profit, earn no praise. He looked at himself in the mirror; beyond his son lay in his crib. There is no choice, he said, quietly, to himself. He closed the drawer without tidying it. She will have something to say about that too, he thought, thinking of his wife's discovery of the drawer with almost bitter satisfaction, as though, now that little else was left him, he derived some actual perverse pleasure from the thought of being universally harrassed, harried from one side and the other.

So when she spoke to him on his way out, he said immediately and harshly, "Downstairs. Where did you think?"

"But I've got food ready," she said. "I made you some lunch."

"You mean now I have to even eat when I don't want to?"

But going downstairs, he was sorry he had raised his voice.

It's hard enough for her without me making it worse, he thought. He descended slowly, buttoning his coat as he went. In the empty hallway his footfalls rang loudly on the steps, falling about his ears in echoes. In his coat pocket was the bank book. I shouldn't get so worked up about something like that, he told himself. What the hell. It's only money.

SPARROWS

IT IS ALWAYS the same. They come at the same hour, because that is regulations, and each time they sit about the bed the same way, as though that were regulations too; stiffly, their hands in their laps, their voices somber and deliberate, and pulling those long, sad faces as though it were incumbent upon them to do so. What the hell are *they* so sad about, I'm the one that's got the cancer.

"How can you say such things?" she says when we are alone, ready to begin crying. "I'm your wife. Don't you think I feel something too?"

Whatever she feels, it is not love. But I do not tell her that. She would only start all over again. It is the noise I cannot stand. I don't care what the others think, the proliferate assembly of cousins and nephews and aunts and second cousins and whomever else I may have lost count of. I never have. But to have her begin bawling all over again is more than I can take. "All right, all right," I say. "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean you."

"My brothers?" she says immediately. "You can say it about them? That they don't care, that they're hypocrites?"

There is no extricating yourself with just a simple statement with her. "No," I say. "I didn't mean them either. I didn't

mean any of them," I say, because she would only follow it right up with her sister and her sister's children, and her sister's great aunt's brother's wife for all I know.

Nonetheless she is hurt. She sits there, not saying anything, looking down at her lap, her hands fidgeting in her lap, moving here and there about her purse. She sits with her coat on, ready to leave. It is a cloth coat, with a fur strip along the collar. The coat is old, and the fur looks like the skin of some mangy cat. I can remember when it was important to me that I get her a new coat.

"I'm sorry," I say. I'm sorry about a lot of things. I'm sorry first of all that I have to lie here in this bed and feel the life ebbing from me and watch them seated about me and not talking at me but beyond me and with that air of polite and elaborate condescension that you use with a child as though I were already passing from this earth and no longer have to be reckoned with. God damn them. God damn all of them with their fat, smug faces and their smug talking as though they own the earth and are better than anyone else. And she would say, "They have a right to be proud, starting with nothing and working themselves up like that."

"Work?" I said. "Work? Is that what they call it now, spending your time figuring out how to doublecross and finagle and not giving a goddamn what you have to do to make a buck so long as you make it? That's a good name for it."

But she wouldn't listen. To hear her speak you would think her brothers were George Washington and Horatio Alger rolled into one. When I tried to tell her that she said, "That's all right. It's easy to see why you don't have a house on Ocean Avenue and can't afford to send your family to the country in the summer."

"And that's the truth," I said. "It's because I value being able to look myself in the face every morning. Just you remember I had my chances too. I didn't have to sell out my end of the partnership to your brothers."

But she had one tack in connection with that and she took it. "You're jealous," she said. "You make it sound like you're so highminded and pure when all the time it's nothing more than just plain envy."

And that was the truth too. I don't deny it. I should have a dollar for every night I spent just laying in bed in the dark, hearing her asleep at my side, thinking, God, why them and not me? Why the hell them? Because I have always dreamed of becoming rich. I would think, One week, just one week let me go to work without having to bring my lunch in a paper bag, and eat in a restaurant the way they do. Or when it was cold or there was a drizzle falling I would think how nice it would be to get on a bus or take a cab home from the station without worrying about the fare, about what I could or could not buy with it. Kids, I would think. They are not even old enough to wipe their own noses let alone know right from wrong and they drive around in new cars while I have to walk the fifteen blocks from the subway rain or shine, hot or cold. Well, that is one thing I won't have to worry about again.

"Don't say that," she says, beginning to sniffle. "You'll be all right soon. Everything will be all right."

"All right?" I say. "All right? What is it you think I believe I have? Measles? The chicken pox? I know what I have." Because if there is one thing I cannot bear it is the evasion and the self-deceit as though if you pretend something is not there and you don't name it, it will cease to exist. Well, I want no part of that. It is bad enough I have had to go through life

surrounded by evasion and half truths but I will not go *out* of life that way, smothered with easy consolations and polite, specious smiles. Cancer is what I have. C.A.N.C.E.R. "I know it, you know it, everyone knows it," I tell her.

She is already crying. She sits looking out at nothing, her face awry with crying; a woman in late middle age, with grey in her hair and wearing an old cloth coat. Sometimes I look at her as at a stranger, she has changed so. But then, I haven't kept my rosy cheeks either.

But I can still remember when I was twelve. Oh yes. I was only a kid but I knew enough already to walk twenty blocks to the adjoining neighborhood so I could walk down streets lined with trees and look at the fine houses there, set upon lawns rich as velvet. I told myself then. I would stand and watch the cars come and go in the driveways and the women in bright summer dresses on the porches or moving across the lawns and I said to myself: Some day I will live in a house like that.

As though I knew. I can think of a lot of other things I'd have been better off knowing and one of them is the more selfish and unscrupulous and indifferent to the most elementary principles of morality you are, the better you will make out. Just look at her brothers for a start. But she is crying enough as it is. "Blow your nose," I say. "You'll feel better."

She does as I say. She sits, hunched over and snuffling, holding a handkerchief to her nose. I watch her. In the room also are the other patients, and their visitors. They watch her. But she does not cease to sob. "Oh Harry," she says. "Harry. Harry. Harry."

"What's wrong now?" I say. Because I'll be damned if she doesn't sound as if she ought to be in bed instead of me. Sometimes, to look around me, I wonder who it is that has the

cancer, they are so solemn looking. Then they go downstairs out into the air and the last of daylight and they get into their cars and drive home to their suppers and their TV programs and to talking on the porch, and they do not give me a second thought. I know. I don't know who they think they are fooling. But then, what can you expect of a family that will cut your throat for a nickel.

It is as though she is clairvoyant. "You make it so hard for me, not getting on with my family," she says when she has gotten control of herself.

"I make it hard," I say. "What about your brothers? You think they make it easy for me?"

"They try to be nice," she says. "They buy things for the kids and they try to help out."

I know the way they help out, acting as though they are the world's greatest benefactors and they know better than I how my life should be run. Telling me how shortsighted I was being and not giving enough consideration to her welfare, and Sam said, "Just because you want to stand on principle is no reason to deprive Annie."

"It's still my house," I said. "I may not have much else but I pay the rent for this place and I hope I still have the say over what goes into it as well as out." Then Benny started to say something in a loud voice but Sam shushed him, and the two delivery men waiting out there in the hallway with the washing machine since they hadn't counted on the hardest part of it being not getting it up the three flight of stairs but simply past the door.

"That's no attitude," Sam said. "Is there anything wrong with wanting our sister to have some of the nicer things in life?"

"Meaning I am not capable of providing them?" I said.

"I wouldn't put it that way," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder and looking me in the face. It is remarkable how clear his eyes could be while he was lying to you. But I just waited to see how he would wriggle out of this one. "Let's just say you have a different way of looking at these things," he said, not taking his eyes from my face. "Maybe a better way. But you have to look at our side of it too."

And he went on about how they didn't have much when they were kids and how they had promised each other to look after each other when they grew up. He almost had me in tears. I guess all that was missing were the violins. I let him go on, not saying anything. If he thought he was putting something over on me with that sweet, let's-be-reasonable manner of his, he had a shock coming. I knew all about him. Maybe he forgot I was his partner for five years.

I waited for him to stop for a minute so I could get a word in. He had to take a breath some time. "Then tell me just one thing," I said. "Why wasn't I told you were going to bring it? You could have phoned last night. I'm home evenings. It couldn't be," I said, "you picked a Wednesday morning because you figured I'd be away at work and when I got home it'd be there and I couldn't do a goddamn thing about it because it would cost me a day's pay to get it out of here and then I wouldn't know where to send it?"

That stopped him for a minute. I guess he must have gotten quite a surprise seeing me at the door when he rang. He didn't count on a little thing such as a cold keeping me home on the one day out of the entire year he chose to bootleg a washing machine into my house. "I don't know what put an idea like that in your head," he said cool as anything. It was Benny who got excited and began shouting up and down the hall. "What

the hell is the big issue?" he said. "A stinking washing machine? If you were half a man she'd have had one five years ago, she wouldn't have to wait for her brothers to get it for her." That got me hot and I told him by God it was my house and my wife his sister or not and I would lead my life as I saw fit and if I saw fit not to drive people to their deaths like some people I knew that was my business. Then I told him to clear out and I'd give him just five minutes, washing machine, delivery men and all, and he shouting back and doors opening up and down the hallway and finally they got out of there.

But I could always count on her to take her brothers' side. "Why couldn't we take the washing machine, if they wanted to give it?" she said. Try and explain it to her. I would be a fine one if after twelve years of telling her about their deceit and unscrupulousness, I were to begin accepting the fruits of it.

"I'd be a worse hypocrite than they are," I told her.

"So?" she said. "If being a hypocrite gets you a house on Ocean Avenue and a new car every year, I don't see what's so terrible." She said if that was being a hypocrite then her brothers had plenty of company and maybe something was the matter with me. "It's easy enough for you to give back the washing machine," she said. "You don't have to drag bundles down to the laundromat every other day."

I could see then there was no point arguing because if she thought I enjoyed counting pennies and stinting on this and on that and the kids being deprived and I seeing the slow and inexorable ruin of my hopes and anticipations, then we might as well be speaking two different languages. I got out of the house and went downstairs and the delivery men were just finishing up loading the washing machine into the truck. I guess they must have thought I was crazy too, turning down a

brand new washing machine that would not have cost me a red cent and for which I had to do nothing more than open the door so they could bring it inside. Well, I am not going to run my life according to what other people think is or is not crazy, even if they are my brothers-in-law.

But I thought of her up there in the apartment, staring at the four walls within which her life had unraveled one bleak day after another. I knew what that washing machine meant to her. She didn't have to make it harder than it was, carrying on like that, as she has ever since that day I came home and told her I was quitting the partnership and she carrying on as though I were taking the bread from her mouth "They're my kids too," I told her. "You don't mind if I want to be able to look them in the face when they grow up, do you?" I said, "If I can't make a living without having to lie and put things over on other people, I'd just as soon see us all in the poor-house."

That was a lot closer to the truth than I thought. I didn't plan it that way. If it were up to me she could have a dozen washing machines and each of them gold plated. But there is such a thing as doing what you believe is right, and self-respect and pride and I thought: God? I took a walk then and the sky was a dense, smoky color and after a while it began to rain, which was about all that was missing, with me half sick and wearing only a thin jacket and about twenty blocks from home. Well, I could stand that too. Any man who thinks all he has to do is work hard and be considerate of the next human being has got to be ready to stand anything. I tell you. Sometimes I wonder why I have gone through all the trouble and deprived myself and I thought maybe she was right after all, wearing just that thin jacket and the rain coming faster and faster out

of the sky now and me getting soaked to the skin and I thought of her and the life she had hoped to live and of the kids, and I thought: God? Why is it so hard?

"All right," I tell her. "What is it they are bootlegging this time?"

"Bootlegging?" she says.

"Giving. What are they giving now, the minute my back is turned?"

She knows what I'm getting at. She sits looking straight before her, a little hunched, her coat rumpled beneath her. "They're only trying to help," she says quietly.

"They know what I think of their help," I say. "What's the matter, can't they wait until I'm decently dead and buried before they begin their little tricks?"

But that only sets her off again, her body shuddering with sobs inside her coat, her hands at her face. There are words she has not learned the meaning of in all the fifty-two years of her life and one of them is morality and self-respect is another and if she thought I was going to lie here and listen to how her brothers were doing this and doing that and not say a word, as though I were already gone and buried, she knows better now. I don't have to hurry it along, I told her. I'll be laying quiet for long enough as it is.

But I have worn her out enough for one evening. When she stops crying I put my hand on her arm. "Go home," I tell her gently. "They're waiting for you."

She looks up with an expression of surprise, still holding the handkerchief to her face. I don't know if it is because of what I have told her, or the tone of my voice. It has become so that I cannot remember the last time I have spoken quietly, without raising my voice. "Go ahead," I say. "Get some rest."

"Yes," she says. "Yes." Yet suddenly she looks about her, alarm in her face, as though she does not know where she is. Well, it's a bad dream for me too. Downstairs they are waiting for her. They don't waste a minute. No sooner does the bell sound than they are up on their feet, giving me those phony smiles, the glib empty consolations. And some of them don't even wait that long. She comes to herself in a moment. She sits there, her hands on her purse, looking at me as though for the first time. I must look something, sick as I am, the hospital gown about me like a sack, my hair disheveled. She always did say I didn't trouble enough about my appearance. The other visitors in the room rise, beginning to leave. Out in the hall there is the hubbub of departing visitors, milling in the corridors, speaking at once. Above the hubbub is the nurse's voice. She will never have any trouble getting my visitors out on time.

She stands up to go. Beyond her the other visitors pass into the corridor. She stands in her rumpled coat, her dress rumpled, holding her purse. She could use a new purse too. Well, that's one more thing her brothers can take care of when I'm gone. They have probably thought of everything else. For a moment it is as though she cannot think what it is she must do or say next. She stands beside the bed, fidgeting with her purse, looking in this direction and that. Upon her face is an expression of unconcealed and utter dismay, such as you would find upon the face of a frightened child. That's all right. When they turn off the lights and I lie in the dark and contemplate that prospect from which there is no escape and which I have thought about and thought about, I don't feel so brave either. I touch her hand.

"What?" she says.

"Go ahead," I tell her. "Go home and get some rest."

"Yes," she says. "You too. Have a good night, Harry," she says.

Sure. I'll put in an order. But sometimes I know when to keep my mouth shut. When she bends over and kisses me on the cheek I tell her, "Just take care of yourself. One of us in the hospital is enough."

Then she is gone. The other visitors are gone. It is quiet now in the hall. Outside there is still daylight left, the sky the color of rust. Downstairs they were probably beginning to wonder what happened to her. It must be a real inconvenience to them, having to drive the thirty blocks or so over to the house to pick her up and bring her here, and then spending an hour sitting around pulling those long, doleful faces as if they really cared while all the time they are thinking of the TV programs they are missing or some poker game, and then bringing her home again.

Well, that is too bad, and I am sorry it isn't something worse because I would show them the same sympathy they have always shown other people, telling me that's life and it's too bad about Berger but they have got to take care of themselves and I said, "I'm not talking about taking care." I said, "It's one thing to take care and it's another thing to go out of your way to steal another man's account."

That got Benny hot and he began to yell up and down the office how I didn't know what the hell I was talking about and it was none of my business, and the girls in the office just sitting there and looking at us, and those out in the shop. "What the hell else do you call it," I said, "when you have arranged with a man's sales manager to work for you in return for bringing over an account? Honest labor?" I told him if that

wasn't stealing then they have rewritten the dictionary since I last looked at it, and he carrying on back and forth in a high, indignant voice as though I had accused him of planning to murder his mother. Well, that was something I wouldn't put past him either.

Sam finally quieted him down though, getting the girls out of there and those in the shop back to work. "The whole world doesn't have to know our business," he said. He was all right. If there was a day he didn't think of everything and six hours in advance, I never heard about it. Then he got to work on me. "Now let's be reasonable about this, Harry," he said.

"All right," I said. "I can be as reasonable as anyone."

But he didn't tell me anything I hadn't already heard from Benny. Only he was quieter about it. Telling me how I was the production manager and it was my job to get the dresses out but it was their job to sell them, and just as they had no right to interfere and tell me to do this and this in such and such a way, it was a two way street. "It's only a matter of good business sense," he said. "You let the man who is qualified to do a job, do it."

But I wouldn't swallow that. "Are you trying to tell me that what you are about to do is no more than a part of your job and I should keep out of it because you are qualified and I'm not?" I said.

"That's right," he said.

"Tell me one thing," I said. "What do you have to do to become qualified, get a diploma in bank robbing?"

I should have known better. I should have known all you have to do is be without scruples and not give a goddamn what you have to do to make a buck even drive a man who believes you are his friend to the wall and Benny said Who the hell did

I think I was saying they were bank robbers and crooks. He was really insulted. You would think he was Abe Lincoln personified, the way he carried on. But then, some people believe so long as they don't use a gun they are as honest as anyone else on this green earth.

And then there are those who believe honesty is for fools. Sam said, "I know how you must feel. That's because things like this are new to you."

"That's the truth all right," I said. "For you this is just something that happens every day, like taking your meals or smoking a cigar, I suppose."

He didn't blink an eye. But he sounded hurt, by the tone of his voice. "You're not the only one who cares about doing what's right, you know," he said.

"I haven't heard anyone else around here say anything about it," I said.

"Just because a man doesn't say anything doesn't mean he doesn't feel it," he said. "I wasn't just talking when I said I know how you must feel. No man feels worse than me about some of the things we have to do sometimes." He said he couldn't help it because it was dog eat dog and some day when he was home free and he had made enough so he could give his family the things they should have, he was going to clear out for good and all and they could kiss his behind. I sat there looking at him. I thought how you could work with a man for five years and still misjudge him. I would never have thought it of him. When he told me any time he did something that was not open and above board it was a matter of self preservation, I believed him. I didn't know any better. Today if he told me he was dying and I could see where he was bleeding and his pulse was weak, I wouldn't believe him until I

had affidavits from fifty doctors of my own choosing to attest to it.

Drucker came along just about then. The boy came in and told us. Sam had him posted out there on the lookout for Berger, who dropped in sometimes. I guess he didn't want Berger to just walk in on them; he might find out what true friends he had. With Drucker there, I could see why they considered themselves regular Honest Abes. I will never understand how a man can work for another for twelve years starting as a stock clerk and being raised step by step and treated as if he were his own son, and then bingo. Right in the back. No qualms, no gratitude, regrets. Pulling a deal like that. I tell you. The closest I have ever come to being at sea is the New Jersey ferry, but looking at him I will always believe what they say about who leaves a sinking ship first.

But Sam had an answer for even that. I didn't know it then, but he was a regular lawyer. If a man were arrested for assaulting a woman and murdering her five children, he could probably make it sound as if they were all ganging up on him and it was self defense; standing there and telling me calm as milk he didn't see what was so terrible about what Drucker was doing. He said, "What the hell else is he supposed to do, sit and hold Berger's hands?" He said a man had to look after his own interest because no one else in this wide world would and if the business was running into the ground Drucker had his own family to look after, he wasn't going to do Berger any good ending up in the gutter with him and I said, There's such a thing as gratitude, you know. He said he knew all right but it never made you a nickel and who did I think I was talking about anyway, Diogenes? He said I was talking about Phil Berger and if I thought what Drucker was doing was bad he

knew a few stories about deals Berger had pulled in his time that would curl my hair, and I said, So? So? I said, "Does that make you sleep better when you get home at night?"

"There's nothing wrong with our sleep," Benny said. "We sleep like babies."

"So much the worse for you," I said.

"I'll tell you who it is can't sleep nights," Benny said. "It's a damned fool who will spend his time worrying about what is and what is not right while he is pulling in his seven thousand a year profit which others are busy making for him. That's who."

"Are you talking about me?" I said.

"I'm not talking about Mahatma Gandhi," Benny said. He looked me in the face. "You're doing a lot of talking but I haven't seen you turn down a check yet," he said.

"All right," Sam said. "That's enough of that."

"Oh no it's not," I said. "I've taken quite a few things this past week but I'll be damned if ——."

"*You've* taken?" Benny said. "Listen, mister. I've got a few things to tell you, too."

"Ben! That's enough!" Sam said.

"I just want to know who the hell he thinks he is," Benny said. "That's not asking too much, considering he's been telling us everything else for the past week, acting so goddamned high and mighty and handing us all that crap about what's right and what's not right. Who the hell do you think you are anyway, Jesus Christ?"

Well, they stood there talking casually for a while, as though there weren't a thing in the world between them. I wonder how they could just keep a straight face. Drucker passed around a couple of cigars and they lit up. He must have felt

real big, outsmarting the man who gave him his start and treated him as he would his own son. Well, there are all kinds of sons, too. They were going to lunch with Berger and after a while he came along. They didn't need the boy to warn them this time; they had their smiles all ready. They asked me along but I got out of it. That must have eased Benny's mind. They went out together, talking and joking and I could hear them for quite a while as they waited for the elevator. The shop was empty, all of them having gone to lunch, and I could hear the four of them clearly out by the elevator, talking and laughing like brothers and I thought how a human being could be so, talking and laughing as though there weren't a thing on their minds and all the time they are about to cut your throat. I have learned better since. I made my mistake believing they were a rarity and the wonder is there aren't more of them, considering they end up owning half the country and the other half is run by their cousins. Love, they say. Good will toward men. Well I have been on this sorry earth for fifty-six years and if there is one thing I have learned it is that talk is cheap and the devil will quote scripture because every man has a tongue and if that is not the busiest part of the human anatomy since a man can use it without even having to think first, then I don't know what is. I said I could use the same phony alibis they were but I am not just looking to salve my conscience. I said if I were going to rob a man deaf and blind I'd at least do it out in the open. Telling themselves things like they had to think of their family or that if they wouldn't do it then someone else would anyway. When I called them bank robbers I did people an injustice. I'll take bank robbers any day.

But she just wanted to know what I was trying to prove. She said I was just being stubborn about it. That's all it was to

her. Stubbornness. That's just like a woman. Sometimes I think they have never heard the word principle and when they do they think it is a foreign language. I could believe that. I told her I wasn't trying to prove a thing. I said it is just that all my life I have been taught to consider the next human being and to do unto others, and I just happened to believe it. "So?" she said. "Believe it. No one's stopping you. But that doesn't mean you have to do something foolish." After a while the elevator came along and they got into it. I could see them through the glass. They got in with Berger in the middle and all of them still talking and I thought how he was even worse off than Christ; he was going to sit down to eat with a whole tableful of Judases.

They are home by now. It is twenty minutes from the hospital and I should know. What with her always telling me how much trouble it must be for them to pick her up and bring her to the hospital and then bring her home again. She could save her breath. I know they are good brothers to her. I never disputed that. It is just that they believe the world ends with their family and everything beyond is fair game. Well, I shouldn't worry about them now. The nurse tells me that. Don't worry about a thing, she says. Just like that. Maybe she doesn't know what it is I have, either. If it were up to her I would just lay here and not think of a thing, and then what would be the use of staying alive. Well, I have the same answer for her I give to my wife. I will be laying quiet for long enough as it is, I tell her. I don't have to hurry it. You can't talk to visitors in the cemetery, I say.

But she is there in the room each evening like clock work. I'll say that for her. She may not be very smart and once she starts she can talk you deaf and blind too, but she knows her

business. Getting that needle in and out of me like that before I can feel a thing. I wouldn't care if she talked until doomsday.

It is to the old man that she goes first. She better get in all of those while she can. They have put a wooden screen about his bed, he has gotten so bad. He can thank the one in the corner for that, beginning to bitch about one thing and another the minute they brought him in as though the hospital were being run solely for his benefit and well being. Telling the doctor how could he be expected to eat with him looking like that, and just to look at him was enough to make you sick. Well, he wouldn't exactly win first prize in a beauty contest, either. Making them hide the old man away like that, like a dog or something you are ashamed of, so he can die alone, behind the blank panels of a bed screen, without so much as a human glance, a touch. I tell you. I hope he is satisfied now. And when they put a screen around him, we'll see how he likes it. But then, there are people who believe they are impervious to what's in store for everyone else.

It does not take her long. The things she must see and bear in a day. I know I couldn't do it. Yet she comes out from behind the screen as cheery as ever. "You're looking chipper tonight," she says. "Someone leave you a million?"

"If they did it wasn't dollars," I say. "And I can think of a few things it could be."

She is already preparing the hypodermic. You could look sour as crab apple and she will tell you she expects you out of bed in a day. Well, I know one person in the room that would apply to. He will be out of bed all right I told her, only he won't be walking. Then our friend in the corner can stop being so concerned about his digestion, bed screen or no bed screen. It's a miracle he has stayed alive this long, I told her.

What with them coming into the room each night secret as thieves, and the voices and the light on the ceiling and the shadows, and he moaning behind the screen. I hear them. I said it is one thing to make all that noise and commotion and interrupt the sleep of people who can bear it, but don't they believe in letting a man die in peace any more? I told her that was one hell of a thing to which to subject a man, medical science or not. Bringing in a crowd of green kids and standing around him and whispering and cutting and looking, holding class over him as though he were a specimen in a test tube. God knows what he thinks. Sometimes he must lay there and think he is already dead and this is the first stage in hell. If that is the latest thing in medical practice, I'll take voodoo I said.

I do not even feel the needle. "There," she says, bending over and swabbing my arm with cotton. "That didn't hurt, did it?" It never does. It's the pain that comes afterward that I cannot stand, which is why they give me the needle. You'll sleep through the night like a baby, she told me the first time. Yet I have spent whole nights rigid against the pain, staring up into the darkness, the sound of my breathing in my ears. If what that old man goes through is hell, then I am at least in purgatory.

But I wouldn't tell her that. That would only set her off, telling me she can't imagine what people did years ago without modern drugs and how wonderful they are and I am lucky to be living in this day and age. Dying, she means. Well, I could tell her a few things about this day and age she wouldn't find in any nurse's manual, or a drug catalogue either. I said, if they didn't have drugs they did without them, that's all. I said, I've managed to do without a few things in my time too.

I told her when they developed a pill against human greed and smugness and hypocrisy, that would be the day and I could think of two right off who could use it. Going through with something like that as easy as you get out of bed in the morning, and expecting me to go along. I wish I could say it served them right. One thing I'll say. They must have had some shock when they heard about him stepping out of a twelfth floor hotel window, but that was the one and only time. They didn't worry after that. They must have expected the heavens above them to open up and the earth below, and when nothing happened they must have thought they could get by with anything. Oh yes. God may see the slightest sparrow fall all right, but what I am wondering is where He was when Berger hit the sidewalk. Well, I am glad at least to see they have grown old. I was beginning to think they were impervious to all of God's laws.

She is through. I will never know how she does it, cheerful to the last minute. She goes out, telling us good night and turning out the light after her. They have a song called End of a Perfect Day. They ought to play that every night. I'm surprised she doesn't sing it to us. I know what her brothers sing. Another day, another dollar. And why the hell not, since all they have to do is leave here and they go back to their fine houses on Ocean Avenue and sit on the back porch or on the lawn beneath the trees, the leaves black as metal rustling in the darkness about them, the flowers blooming. Well I can't help that. I did the best I could, even if she never believed it. And to hear her brothers, you would think I got sick for the sole end and purpose of discomfitting her. Well, they are welcome to try it. If I had a choice I wouldn't want to go through something like this for both their houses, and ten years' profits

thrown in besides; laying here day after day and they sit around the bed not two feet away and I can talk and smell and breathe air and yet all the time I am slipping away, it is as though I am drifting away from them and there is nothing to hold on to, no one to reach out and hold me back.

But they never asked me. They must have had this extra case of cancer around and they said let's see who's got so much trouble a little more won't matter. I wouldn't be surprised. Things always seem to run that way for me. Well I can't help that either. All I know is I have always done what I was supposed to and if things haven't worked out as they should, they can find someone else's doorstep to put it on. And just let her brothers try something. Acting as though they know more than I do and are wiser just because they will outlive me. If they think they are going to walk all over me because I am on my back and incapacitated, they better think again. They better make sure I am good and buried and they have thrown on the last shovelful themselves, before they start anything. I may be stuck here in a hospital room and with no more than six months to live and I am one to their two, but I have given up too much to live the kind of life I have wanted to to let them get away with anything while I can still move and draw breath. I'll be dead when I die, not a minute sooner.

THE WAY TO ELDORADO

WALTER TRITKA COULD not have said at what moment he had made up his mind to go to America. But there at the edge of the field, beneath a clump of trees in whose shade they had paused a moment to tighten the harness and turn the plow, he turned to his sister's husband and told him.

The other looked quietly at him. He was a big man, with large, blunt hands. His face, burned by constant sun, weathered to the color and texture of old leather, was gentle, benign almost. "Ahh," he said. "To go to America."

"Yes," Walter said quickly, in a kind of assent almost, as though the other had said it first. He was a young man, almost fifteen years younger than his brother-in-law. He spoke with a young man's eagerness, a young man's utter absence of reflection, the slow fatalism that comes with years. "I have thought it over," he said. "This is no life." He gestured, taking in with his sweeping arm the brown, broken earth extending to the horizon between intermittent trees, the intermittent houses, the more substantial clutter of the village beyond. "What is there here for a man?" he said.

"You are absolutely right," his brother-in-law said, though he did not look up from the harness at which he was bent, his hands did not cease upon the leather. Before him the horse stood immobile, as though carved of wood, the reek of its sweat rising in waves. It blew over them upon the noon's hot, gentle suspiration.

"You work and you work and you grow old with nothing to show for it," he said with bitterness.

"It is the way things are," his brother-in-law said quietly.

"My own father died in this field, dropped dead among the furrows," he said.

The other rose. "I know," he said. He clucked to the horse, the plow lines already settled about him, his back braced to their pull. He held the plow with both hands. "Come," he said. "The day is going, and it is a big field."

But Walter was not through. They moved out from under the trees, advancing across the field into the bright, fecund stillness of midday. They moved slowly, the one rigid against the pull of horse and plow, the other ten feet behind scattering seed, in a tableau as changeless and immemorial as the land itself. That's it, he thought. Am I supposed to die like my father too, falling here among the furrows, with nothing to show for my life? "Is that it?" he said aloud, loudly, so that ahead his brother-in-law half turned and spoke across his shoulder. "What?" he said.

And without ceasing, his right arm moving in broad, measured arcs above the earth while from his hand seeds fell in flurries gentle as snow, he went on to list the entire harsh catalogue of his grievances, while now and then his brother-in-law would reply, not ceasing either, both of them continuing to advance over the field that same, undeviable distance apart, in the same undeviable attitudes of plowing and sowing, so that from afar it was as if they were not even aware of each other's presence.

At the day's close they unharnessed the horse, leaving the plow in the field where it stood. In the distance they could see others doing likewise, the plows upright, standing in sil-

houette like sudden, bizarre shoots. They led the horse from the field, down to the road where they would meet the others, returning also to the village, to home; vague shapes, shadows in movement along the dust, quietly murmurous above the rising click and whirr of insects, though Walter knew them all by their voices, their walk. Though their faces were but faint blurs in the dying light he knew as well how each one looked as if it were full day; each turn of mouth, thrust of nose, each worn and irremediable flesh which he believed to be the heritage of his kind so long as they dwelt in this doomed and bitter land, handed from father to son as though it were palpable as family Bible or gold watch. Of course, he thought. It is fine here for the Count and for people like Zemcik. They don't have to sweat in the fields like animals day after day, burning up in the summer, freezing in the winter. He thought, I wouldn't have any complaints either if all I did was give parties and ride around in fancy carriages brought from Cracow.

And then he found the word for which he sought and which best epitomized what he felt and why he knew he must leave. Dignity, he said fiercely, to himself, moving at his brother-in-law's side while about them the swift dusk shifted and dissolved, the night came on. It is that a man cannot live here with dignity and hold up his head. What he had in mind were the small, daily gestures of obsequiousness. When they talked to the Count it was with downcast eyes, the shuffling of feet; hands rose to remove hats in a single instantaneous reflex. Once the Count had stopped them in the rain, seated within his carriage, bent forward a little, his hands folded upon the silver head of his cane, discussing casually the weather and the prospects for the harvest while they stood bareheaded in the road, the mud, replying in slow, respectful tones while the

rain streamed and streamed upon them. A man should not have to bear that too, he thought. He did not hate the Count. He didn't even hate his land, his heritage, which condemned him forever to a life abject and straight as a corridor along which there were no turn-offs, no doors through which to step. He abjured them. It was as though he had discovered a turn-off, a door. He thought: A man does not *have* to live here. This is not the only nation on the earth.

At his side his brother-in-law moved without speaking, except to respond to those who greeted him. From across the dusk they called to him, his name. They all knew him; in the dying light they could not mistake the erect figure taller than most, the deliberate, even gait. Though he was only forty they spoke to him as they would to the elders; they came to him for advice. After they had gone on a while his brother-in-law said, "Have you thought about money?"

"Money?" he said.

"They are still charging for boat tickets, aren't they?" his brother-in-law said.

"Yes. Yes," he said. "Of course."

"Well?" his brother-in-law said.

"I have *some* money saved," he said. This was not strictly true. He had some money due him for work he had done for Burgomaster Zemcik, but it was already owed. But he spoke at once so as not to appear foolish, to appear as though he had had the money for the tickets in mind all along.

"At least it is a start," his brother-in-law said. And he proceeded to explain how arrangements could be made whereby Walter would not need the entire sum of the three tickets at once, only a down payment, an advance, the balance to be paid once he was in America and he was working; which he,

Walter, already knew of and had investigated and realized with a forlorn and sinking despair that even barring such commonplace disasters as illness or drought or simply a poor harvest, it would take him five years at least of constant and unremitting saving, of scraping and hoarding trivial, niggard sums, to accrue enough for the down payment alone.

He had been about to tell his brother-in-law that out in the field. That had been the result of a forlorn hope too. He did not know if his brother-in-law had any money. If he had, neither did he know if he would lend it. Yet so great was his despair, his desperation. He was totally devoid of hope. He was about to tell him now. He slowed, putting his hand upon the other's arm, looking across into the other's face. But even in this there seemed to operate some fatalism, some principle of doomed and inescapable frustration. No sooner did he touch the other's arm than there rose the faint, distant drumming of hoofbeats, so that it must have seemed to his brother-in-law Walter had touched him only to call attention to that. When his brother-in-law looked up it was to stare along the road; when he paused it was only to listen.

At his side, Walter listened too, though there was no interest in his face. He was thinking how he had been frustrated in this too. He looked at his brother-in-law intent upon the hoofbeats. Now would be a fine time to tell him, he thought. He decided to tell him after whatever it was along the road came and went. It was now almost full dark, the short stark twilights of spring, the sudden stars. In the distance the hoofbeats grew. The carriage appeared suddenly, around a turn, a bulky, darker shape behind the dark shapes of the horses, appearing between the trees ranked on either side. They could not have been able to tell, from that distance, in that light, that the

carriage was the Burgomaster's. Yet they began at once to step off the road, pausing one by one in the dank growth at the road's edge, stilling the insects there so that silence lay in small patches about them. When they recognized the carriage those who were wearing hats began to remove them. Walter could see in that faint light neither dusk nor dark, the slight stirrings about him, the almost imperceptible movements of hand to head. He stood a little behind and to the left of his brother-in-law. They both wore the same kind of hat, one of light cotton, with a narrow crescent-shaped bill. He was already thinking: This once. Just this once.

When his brother-in-law began to remove his cap Walter stood without moving, his arms at his sides, his eyes fixed straight before him. He did not move when the carriage was upon them. It came by at an even pace, not fast, yet with all the clatter and haste of speed, not five feet away, so that any of them might have bent and reached out and touched it; the surging flanks of the horses, the wheels, the embossed door beyond which the carriage's interior appeared completely dark, so they could not see if Burgomaster Zemcik sat within, or his wife, or both. Or neither, he said. He spoke to himself, smiling to himself. That would be a good one, he said. Taking their hats off to an empty carriage.

The carriage swept past, raising the dust. He stood without moving, the cotton cap on his head, a young man's smile of defiance on his lips. Yet for an instant his breathing had almost ceased. Now that the carriage was past he breathed quickly, deeply. He looked at his brother-in-law. He had always felt something a little like awe for him. Seeing him there at the road's edge, standing ankle deep in growth, his cap in his hands, he felt almost contempt. He would have denied his own

defiance had been due to the poor light in which nothing could be clearly seen, to the fact that he stood to the side and a little behind his brother-in-law, partly hidden by him. My God, he thought, as though seeing his brother-in-law for the first time. He's a clod. He will live like this to his dying day, slaving in the fields, taking off his hat to carriages.

By the time he left the others he had made up his mind to rob the Burgomaster's house. He said nothing to his brother-in-law. They came to his house first and he said good night and went up the path, as he always did. The others went on beyond. Half way to the house he paused and stood listening for a moment, the murmurous voices floating on the air, the faint, occasional jangle of harness. Directly before him was the house. On the left was the small plot in which, in season, he grew the trivial crops of vegetables, the tomatoes, onions and carrots out of the niggard earth, enough for his own needs. He stood a moment thinking of the Burgomaster, the carriage. He did not actually believe the carriage had been empty. The Burgomaster often went on trips at odd hours, on business, up and down the province throughout which he owned lands, forest, interest in a railroad. He thought of the Burgomaster's house, dark within its dark grove of trees, the servants dispersed, empty except for the housekeeper, her son who doubled as gardener and watchman. His breathing suddenly came faster now, his blood faster, as though he and his blood knew at the same instant: *There is no other way.*

He was not surprised at himself. At supper, eating the thin potato soup, the coarse bread which were the unvarying staples of his diet, he thought: What then am I supposed to do, rot here like the others? Behind the flimsy partition erected to make the single room two, the child cried intermittently. He

did not think of himself as a thief, a criminal. So great was his hope, his despair, the robbery seemed to him to be the sole logical course and direction open to him.

Nor did he tell his wife. Later, at her side, listening to her slow, faintly nasal breathing while she slept, he thought: I will tell her a rich uncle died. Actually he did not know if she desired to go to America. He hadn't asked her, and she had never told him. He assumed it, just as he assumed each day the sun would rise. Just as he assumed certain things about America, though by now these had been transformed into something like actual belief, as unshakable as the religious man's belief in heaven. He had never been to America. Neither had he spoken to someone who had. In this he was like the religious man, too. The closest he had come was to receive a letter from a friend, a man with whom he had grown up and who had gone to America a year earlier.

That was another thing. He did not think of America so much as a place in which gold lay in the streets. More often than not he didn't even regard it as a place at all; geographic, within fixed latitudes, occupying space and distance upon the earth. Foremost in his mind was the notion of America as a condition, a state of moral purity alongside which the fact that you had to traverse three thousand miles of ocean and you needed a ticket for which you had to pay, to get there, was only incidental. He thought of America as a region of the spirit almost, so firm in his mind was the notion that at least here out of all the corrupt and bitter earth no man need feel greed or malice or deceit, at least here men lived in a state of serene and perpetual rectitude. He believed that. What misled him was the absence of titles, the hard ineradicable lines of privilege, the familiar appurtenances of spoliation generally.

It led him to believe that in America no men took bribes, lusted, transgressed. As though all that were necessary to make men better than they were was a span of virgin continent and hope and repudiation of the bitter knowledge it had cost the old world so much to gain, which was them both. That was crucial to him: the belief that men could (and should) be made better than they were. In other circumstances he might have been a revolutionary. When he read the short, scrawled letters of his childhood friend he did not believe they were from the same man he had known. He believed that *he* would not be the same man, once he entered America.

Now he lay contemplating the robbery of Burgomaster Zemcik's house. It seemed easy to him, so that for a moment he wondered why he had waited so long to think of it. I could have been out of here and gone already, he thought. The idea that he had spent the last few months, even years, at his old life needlessly, tormented him. He became impatient. It was as though waiting even mere hours now, was more than he could bear.

He went over the robbery in his mind. He knew exactly how he would manage it, as though he had already done it and returned. At his side his wife breathed heavily, with a harsh, nasal sound; behind the partition his child breathed, stirred. My son, he thought. My son. The words still sounded strange to him. Though the child was now more than a year old, he still had not yet become accustomed to the idea of being a father. He lay with his arms folded under his head, staring up into the darkness. Through the window starlight fell, a faint blue neither light nor dark, suffusing the entire room as beyond the trivial walls, the rough timber and clay thrown up in haste against the seasons, it suffused the entire

countryside, hill and dale, brake and brook, so that for an instant it seemed as though the walls too had vanished and he lay open to the immense, calm, inscrutable contemplation of night.

He awoke suddenly. One moment he had been thinking of his son and the next he had been asleep. He had no idea how long he had slept. His first thought was that he had slept through the night and it was now almost dawn. I have ruined everything, he told himself quietly, in despair. Yet he rose abruptly. He flung back the cover and sat up, fully awake at once, staring blindly into the darkness. He came immediately off the bed, not waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. He moved like a blind man across the room to the window, his hands extended tentatively before him. Suddenly he was at the window. Star and spring sky soared before him in glittering panorama, lighting up the countryside. By the position of the constellations he knew at once it was only a little past midnight. Thank God for that at least, he told himself, letting out his breath.

By then he could see in the dark. He dressed quickly, soundlessly. It was quite cold. The cold seemed to lay along the floor, the earth, as palpable as water and about waist high. He began to shiver. Shivering, he stood a moment over his son before he left, smoothing the covers the child threw off in his sleep. For you it will be different, he said, soundlessly, addressing the sleeping child. A new life. He felt at that moment between himself and the trivial form beneath his hand a bond of pride and hope and responsibility stronger than anything he had felt before. He bent and kissed the cotton cover, where he thought the child's head to be. Then he left.

He struck out directly for the Burgomaster's house. He did

not take the road, though it was not likely he would meet anyone on it at this hour. There is no sense in taking chances, he thought. He went in a straight line from the back of his house across a sloping field of flinty earth and grass and random pines in which, in daytime, children played, and into the woods beyond. Looking once over his shoulder in the direction of the village, he saw no lights, only a crazy mosaic of shadow and starlight. It is as if there is no village at all, he thought.

Yet he heard the dogs half way to the Burgomaster's house. He moved at a fast, steady pace. He carried a flour sack rolled into a tight bundle beneath his arm. He was warm at once, despite the thin jacket, the sudden spring chill which would be frost upon window and leaf by morning. The trees were still quite bare. Beyond a lattice of boughs soared a sky wild with stars, and a thin crescent moon. He did not once lose his way. He was not conscious of giving direction any thought, yet he moved unhesitatingly and in a direct line through woods he would have had trouble keeping his bearing in by day. If he thought of anything at all it was to remember that his wife would not be alarmed to find him gone, since he often rose at night to sit at the window or before the house, brooding mutely upon the village, the countryside, the forlorn and empty prospect of his fate. But no more, he thought. That is over. At that moment he felt something closely akin to actual joy.

He emerged from the woods on the fringe of a plowed field. Again he did not hesitate. He came out from among the trees at full tilt, and at full tilt continued across the field, his face fixed in an expression of calm and unshakable resolve, his jacket flying. Keeping close to the trees he skirted the field,

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looking neither right nor left, and it was only after he had gone half way across that he realized he was on the very field he worked by day. Of course, he thought. Then he thought: So this is what it looks like at night. Yet actually it looked no different. Only the furrows appeared deeper, clawed in savage and exactly parallel rows across the earth; suddenly there blew upon him the ancient, rank smell of opened earth. In all he stood there no more than a moment. Yet before he resumed he leaned forward and with unhurried and deliberate calm, he spat upon the ground.

He had to cross two more fields and a vale studded with stone outcroppings, in which only weeds grew and a brook ran, before he came to the Burgomaster's land. Then he was on the estate itself, before the house, within a grove of trees planted in a phalanx about the house for privacy. From among the trees he could see the house, bulked, blotting out a part of the sky, the stars. The house was in complete darkness. Ahh, he thought. That had been his one source of possible concern, that even at such a late hour someone would still be awake, the house still lighted. Specifically he had in mind the housekeeper's son. Sometimes when the Burgomaster left on a trip he invited friends to the house to sit in the kitchen until early morning drinking the Burgomaster's wine, smoking his cigars. He probably didn't get enough notice this time, he thought sardonically, thinking of the haste, the abrupt, last-minute bolting at twilight. He and the housekeeper's son were childhood friends. The housekeeper's son had given him such invitations too, but he had never accepted, even before he was married. I don't have to come sneaking around like a beggar just for some wine, he said. Now he stood in a copse before the house, breathing lightly, hearing the sound of his breathing in his ears.

He stood there watching the house for a full half hour. When at length he emerged from among the trees and started for the house it was at the unhurried, even pace of a man simply strolling about the grounds. He thought that: the slow stride not even very careful, the easy calm. I am not even nervous, he thought. He had expected at least that. Yet his very composure was an indication of the light in which he regarded what he was about to do; as an act justifiable and even actually right and with that significant difference in shading between it and simply stealing, as that between murder and the killing of men in war. He stayed on the grass, off the gravel carriage path which ran from the road to the house and back to the road again in a broad parabola about an eighth of a mile long. I don't have to announce that I'm coming too, he said, speaking to himself.

Yet he knew he could not keep his presence a complete secret. By the time the dogs came from around the house in a fast silent rush he had already taken the meat from the unrolled flour sack. He watched them slow, then trot across the lawn toward him, paired, almost as if in harness; noiseless as shadows. He counted on those first moments of recognition. Then they were at his feet, nuzzling the final meat intended for his own supper table while he bent above them and ran his hands over their hard backs and flanks, whispering to them. He left them there. He went on toward the house, into its shadow and past the shrubs which grew in a line before the front windows, himself a shadow.

He found an unlocked window at once. It was as if the house knew him too, as had the dogs. Why not? he thought. I've been here often enough. He had been to the house as recently as a week before, to weed the garden and turn over the earth for spring seeding. One moment he stood motionless

before the unlocked window, the next he was through it and in the house. Except for a sliding sound when the window was pushed open, he entered without a sound. He stood there at the window, breathing lightly, staring straight before him though he could not see a thing. Just outside the window insects resumed, shrilling now from the identical spot on which he had stood, as though he had only to step away from a spot to draw sound out of the darkness after him, as a knife draws blood after it when it lifts from the flesh. Though he stood there a full moment, he still could see nothing. He did not need to. It is as if I would have to look at the palm of my hand, to see what it's like, he thought. Though he could see only blurred and indistinct shapes, only a little paler than the darkness itself, as though bleached from it, about him, he believed he could find his way about the room as well as in daylight.

Therefore he remained where he was not so much waiting for his eyes to adjust so he could make out the shapes about him, as listening. To the right and in back of the room in which he now stood was the kitchen, and beyond that a wing added after the house had already been completed, as though as an afterthought, which gave the house an odd, misshapen appearance and which contained the servants' rooms. Even when both the Burgomaster and his wife were gone and the servants dispersed, the housekeeper and her son stayed on, tending the house, the grounds. He knew that. He stood there listening for them. On the upper floor and to the side of the house, overlooking the garden and the gentle vista of lawn and carriage path extending down to the road, was the Burgomaster's wife's bedroom. He listened for her too. He did not know if she had left with her husband or not. I should have found out, he

thought. It would have saved me a lot of useless worry. Actually he was not worried at all. What he felt at that moment was an exultation he could not have put into words. It is as good as done, he thought. It is as good as done and I am gone. He did not mean simply the house. About him, stretching away on all sides in the darkness, to the ultimate sea, was the land which he worked by day and brooded upon by night. It was when he thought of the land, and his old life which was inextricable from it, that he felt actual contempt for his brother-in-law. That his brother-in-law chose to remain on the land and endure with the undisheartened fatalism of his kind the constant orderly progression of travail upon travail, which was his lot, he considered the height of folly.

When he had stood so for a full minute, hearing no sound, making none, he started across the room. He believed he was safe. So far, so good, he thought. He believed it would be so from start to finish. He was in the dining room and he went directly to where the huge china cabinet stood against the wall. He knew of the safe in the study. There is nothing in there but peanuts, he thought. Where in the house the Burgomaster kept those enormous sums of cash which were legend in the village and which he used to transact business with in the old manner of his forebearers, with the actual heft of silver and bank notes in the hand, buying and selling whole estates, forests, half a railroad, Walter had never found out. This is good enough, he thought. He had in mind the china cabinet, the silver plate, trays, candlesticks, glinting in vivid row on row in the sunlight which fell upon them by day.

Now the cabinet was only a pale smudge in the darkness. He advanced across the room, skirting the long table set in the center of the room, chairs ranked profoundly along its length,

as precisely as if he moved in full light, though actually he found his way as a blind man would, by feel, the unconscious balancing of faint resonances, sounds, the unconscious sense of presences before and about him. Yet he should have depended more on sight. In his eagerness his eyes were fixed upon the faint smudge of the cabinet when they should have been elsewhere, and so the first he knew of the one chair placed out from the table, as though by the casual movement of a man rising from his place and leaving the chair where it stood, was when he struck it with his knee and it fell over with what in all that silence and darkness seemed like the force and noise of an actual explosion.

He stopped moving at once. He did not even wait for the sound of the falling chair. In that hiatus between the time he struck the chair and that of its concomitant noise he seemed to muse in impotent and despairing regret upon the insignificance of all human calculation. There was time enough for that: the vain desire to turn back time only a moment and start over. Then he heard the chair strike the floor. He stood there, immobile, crouched, his breath suddenly rapid and light, hearing the clatter fall in echoes about his ears. God, God, God, he thought. For a moment he did not know whether to stay or run. Beyond the window insects shrilled. But when nothing followed hard upon the noise he began to calm. They are probably dead asleep, he thought after he had stood there a minute or so and still no sound interrupted the insects' high thin crescendo pitched at that single note. He believed the housekeeper's son to be lying drunk in his bed after all. Thank God for the Burgomaster's wine, he thought, smiling now thinking: I could carry the whole house away and he wouldn't know it. Whereas the moment after he struck the chair he

saw clearly and unmistakably the disaster into which his discontent had led him, he now felt more certain of the wisdom of his course than ever. Yet when he resumed he was as careful as ever. Carefully he stepped around the chair he could now see, now that it had fallen, leaving it where it lay.

It was five more steps to the china cabinet. When he came and stood before it he was at such an angle that in the glass doors of the cabinet he saw suddenly the stark, full reflection of the window at his back, and a fragment of the sky and the dark shapes of trees beyond. Like the surface of a still pool, the glass held the image of a night filled with that faint impalpable glow which was light and yet not light, and the glitter of distant stars. When he moved it was gone. He moved to put his hands upon the cabinet. In the last ten years he had seen the cabinet at least twenty times a year. Yet this was the first time he had actually touched it. The wood had a smooth, almost malleable feel like that of old silver beneath his fingers. He felt for the door frames, standing directly before the glass which now held no reflection at all. In one hand he held a broken spoon handle, ground to a thin, flat blade at one end. He probed along the snug edges of the door frames with it, seeking a space wider than elsewhere. When he found it he wedged in the spoon handle. The doors gave instantly, without effort, springing open with a faint silvery sound, like the jangle of tiny bells.

He did not move at once. For a moment or so he merely stood there, the spoon handle in one hand, the yawning cabinet doors before him. Behind him were the traces of his advance; the chair, the open window. Beyond that, on the sparse lawn over which he had come, was the meat he had left for the dogs. He stood as if about to cross some actual bound-

ary, some precise physical demarcation the one side of which was entirely different from the other. It was as if entering the house was one realm, and this another, rather than all of it a single whole; as a man at a river which marks the border of two entirely dissimilar countries will see the same water running along either bank, the same bush and brake growing beyond.

He crossed the river. As he reached into the cabinet he thought: I should have brought a bigger sack. He worked quickly, easily, picking what he sought from the darkness with uncanny deftness, as though the pieces materialized between his fingers by some kind of magic: plate and candlestick and silver. Cool air now filled the room, pouring in through the open window all the while he stood there. In one hand he held the unrolled sack in which he had brought the meat for the dogs; with the other he ransacked the shelves, methodically and with all the aplomb of an experienced housebreaker.

More than cool air entered the room at his back. Beneath the door at the far corner of the room sudden light appeared in a yellow sliver, gleaming upon the polished hardwood floor. He worked on, rhythmic, intent, oblivious to the air and light both. So intent, so exhilarated by his apparent success, that the first he knew of someone else in the room was when he suddenly felt one arm clamp itself about his throat from behind and another pin his own right arm to his body, and he thought, What's this? What's going on? He did not begin to struggle immediately. There was a pause, a momentary hiatus of actual disbelief, as though what was happening to him was contrary to all reason and the laws of nature, during which he permitted himself to be yanked backward and bent upon the fulcrum of a knee in the small of his back.

It was when he realized the sack had been torn from his grasp that he began to struggle. It was as though only the sack, the silver, had any meaning for him. He heard the sack strike the floor as from a great distance. He heard the myriad jangle of silver scattering over the floor in all directions. I will never find it in the dark, he thought. Then he seemed to realize the import of what was happening. I must get away, he thought in alarm. He was strong. Work upon the very earth he disdained and sought to repudiate had toughened him. He broke the hold upon him in an instant. Yet the other continued to flail at him. The hands upon him were like the darkness made palpable. They were at him in a wild flurry, his face, arms, waist; octopuslike. It was as though he struggled with the darkness itself, seeing no face, grasping no shape or body though at last the other clamped a hold upon his chest and they stood locked in each other's embrace chest to chest and thigh to thigh and he could hear the other's breathing going *hah hah* against his ears. He did not think that he struggled with the man with whom he had grown up and once been quite close. He thought only of the urgent need to be somewhere else, where he did not know.

So when the other called suddenly against his ear, "The light, Mama. Quick, the light, I have him," in a voice as familiar to him as the streets of the village and the land around, he felt the shocking heave and surge of his blood in surprise. I am dreaming, he thought. Yet it was to escape the growing light in the hallway that he struggled again in the other's grasp and freed one arm and struck at the other blindly and with all his force.

The other fell away from him at once, rigid, as a tree topples. He fell with a dull, heavy sound. He made that one sound

only; no outcry, no blundering or thrashing upon the floor. It was the utter silence: at once Walter seemed to sense something terrible had happened. Dear God in Heaven, what is it I have done? he thought. Yet he was on his hands and knees, on the floor, reaching out with one hand and feeling for the sack like a blind man, when the light from the hallway fell upon him. He looked up, blinking into its glare. His expression was one almost of embarrassment, like that of a man caught at a child's game. He was in the stance of a child, on all fours, blinking guiltily in the sudden light. He and the woman saw the other at the same instant: he lay sprawled at the foot of the cabinet, his head resting at a bizarre angle, his arms inert as strings at his sides, palms turned up; quite still, bleeding a little from the ear. The woman screamed at once. The lamp wavered, throwing wild shadows over the floor in accompaniment. She screamed three or four times while he continued to gaze in mute astonishment upon the peaceful, open face of the man he had known since childhood and whose death he had now inadvertently caused. He fled without a sound.

He ran headlong from his crouched position, as in a race. His shadow ran before him, around the table, over several upended chairs, leaping when he leaped. Before him was the window: beyond, darkness, the hard shapes of trees. Once on the lawn two shadows ran before him, darker than the darkness. His own was gone. The two shadows were the shapes of dogs and they paced him for a while in soundless pantomime. They moved without effort, untrammelled, as though they did not touch the earth or break the air, first straying far ahead then falling back so that between one and the other he saw the small sudden moons of eyeballs, the sudden glint of teeth.

Behind him the woman continued to scream. He heard her

almost to the trees. Her cries had a pierceless, shocking quality, coming so upon the stillness of dead of night. Yet his first concern was the dogs. Though he ran on without hesitation or falter, he was terrified of them. They were German shepherd, savage animals almost the weight of a man. Once he had seen them run down a man, a poacher, knocking him from his feet with the force and speed of a projectile, and upon him in an instant. Be good, he said to the dogs, silently, as if in prayer. Please be good. Yet apparently they did not smell his fear, as he believed. Or perhaps it was simply that they knew him so well, as though being about the house as much as he was gave him a kind of immunity from them, rendered him interdict. They abandoned him suddenly, while he could yet hear the cries. So silent, so ghostlike had they been all the while, he could not say at what moment they were at his side and what moment they left him, falling back on the grass. Still he did not slow. He went on at the same pace, running heavily, his body jarring with each step. At his back the house diminished, the single window in which light now shone and flickered and from which the cries continued to emanate, carrying across the stillness. The cries followed him to the trees. It was not until he was among the trees, beyond earshot, that he could permit himself to say that which since the instant of flight he had been trying to deny: She knows me, he said quietly, to himself, in despair. She is calling my name.

He ran on. He was beyond the copse now, into actual woods. He could no longer see the house, the lighted window, even if he turned. He saw nothing before him. Stumbling, he put out one hand to keep from falling but his hand seemed to be held back, as if tied to his side and he went lunging and crashing on among the trees and undergrowth. He fell heavily, the

sky abruptly tilting backward, the dark shapes of trees. He lay there without moving, panting, the harsh sound of panting in his ears, the hard feel of earth and broken undergrowth along the entire length of his body. Lying there, he discovered that his hand held the sack filled with silver. He had forgotten about the sack. Now he contemplated it with an expression of actual horror. He saw again the body sprawled bizarrely and peacefully at the foot of the cabinet, the pale glare of lamp-light falling into the room, the woman screaming above it. He threw the sack from him in a reflex of revulsion and dismay. The silver made a light, myriad tinkle in the darkness, among the undergrowth. What have I done? he thought. Dear God, what is it I have done? He lay without moving, in the same position as that in which he had fallen, with his face turned down into the sparse grass and in his nostrils the dank cool smell of earth not often in sunlight, shuddering quietly and steadily until at length his remorse was too much to bear and he thought suddenly: It's not as if I meant to do it. He thought: What's done is done, I can't bring him back now. And he went on to berate his friend for his foolhardiness in coming into the room and his clumsiness in striking his head on the cabinet, as though he had done so intentionally, as though the entire night's mischance of events had been contrived solely for his, Walter's, frustration and denial. He began to curse the other harshly and steadily. "The fool," he said, aloud, raising his face from the ground. "The damned stupid drunken fool." He was now bent fully upon absolving himself. He sat up, the sky overhead, the trees around. "It's his own fault," he said. "He didn't have to come after me. What is it to him if someone robs the house, the Burgomaster won't starve." He went on like that talking and talking to himself, his words gaining in vehemence.

At length he ceased. It was as though he finally believed the words. Because when he thought again of his earlier impulse to repudiate the silver and leave it here in the woods, it was with astonishment. What could I have been thinking of? he said, quietly, to himself. He thought of the new life in America of which he had always dreamed and which the silver represented. He thought how now he had the silver, within arm's reach. For the first time since he had fled the house an expression other than of fear and despair came into his face: this time it was elation. For the first time in all the twenty-five years of his life he ceased to conceive of his life as a small dark space within high walls, into which no light shone, from which there opened no door. It was as though suddenly a door had opened, and he could see before him his life straight as a corridor at the end of which shone a glittering vista of trees in sunlight, and open green fields. He believed he need only walk down that corridor. Apparently he had no thought at all, any longer, of all that had happened earlier. Because when he reached over and took the silver again, it was with his old sense of purpose, his old air of calm and easy assurance.

Yet when he rose to his feet and went on, he chose no fixed course. He blundered again, picking his way at random among the trees. What is the matter with me? he thought with irritation. It was not until he found himself on the road to the village that he came to himself. He found himself in the center of the road, in the pale dust, alone in a place where he had never been alone before. Before him the village lay around a turn, invisible beyond invisible trees: overhead the constellations kept time, themselves timeless, sweeping silently and grandly across the sky in their immutable courses. He turned suddenly and crashed into the underbrush at the side of the

road. He ran a short distance, then stopped. He crouched in the underbrush, leaves brushing against his face, breathing heavily, thinking, What am I doing? I can't go back there. He believed they already knew of his deed in the village, as though the old woman had come faster than he.

Yet when he moved again he did not alter his course. He went on toward the village, though now he was more circumspect, coming around behind the village, through those woods into which he had passed earlier, from his house and across a field of flinty earth at its back in which weeds grew almost knee high. He was thinking calmly and evenly: Even if they have already found out they will first have to go to the Count for the dogs and then they will have to bring them to the Burgomaster's house, before they can even begin. He believed he was taking no risk. There is plenty of time, he told himself. At the back of his mind was the one unfading hope that they did not yet know of the housekeeper's son, so that he might see his wife and child once more before he left. The hope died as he stood on the edge of the woods, looking out across the field toward the village, and saw the small rectangles of light where houses were, proliferating even as he watched, and the movements of shadows upon the windows and outside on the paths leading to the village square. Without hope he listened to the faint commotion of men hurrying in the dark, the movement of horses, calls, the opening and closing of doors.

It doesn't matter, he told himself, quietly, without conviction, looking out from the trees upon the men among whom he had spent his life and who were now preparing to hunt him down. All that matters is that I have the silver and then I will be gone from here forever. Yet once all hope had died, what he felt in its place was an anguish so great as to be something al-

most physical. Even when already deep in the woods, doubling back to the shallow stream which ran in a broken course out of the eastern mountains and over the fields and along which he hoped to lose the dogs, he considered turning back to the house. He relived again those moments before he had left the house, hearing again his wife's mild breathing as he dressed, bending once more over his son, aghast suddenly at how far he had come and his own lonely and irrevocable course, and he thought quietly and with surprise: All I did was step out the door.

He was at the stream then. At his back was a wake of torn leaves and trampled undergrowth, marking his passage. The stream ran quietly before him. Ahead it disappeared in the darkness, as in a cave, though he could see, from time to time, the sudden glint of starlight, reflected on its surface. His way was clear. He knew exactly what he must do, step by step, without alternatives. First he would lose the dogs along the stream. Then he would strike out for Cracow where he could sell the silver. Thinking of Cracow, and of the money for the silver, it seemed at last he could see the end to his harassment and running.

The stream numbed his legs at once. He entered clumsily, slipping a little on the wet grass along the bank, the sack balanced upon his shoulder. Once in the stream he began to run. The water was almost knee high, and icy from the snow's thawing in the eastern mountains. Though he ran on he could feel the numbness continue to rise along his legs, as though the actual level of the water were rising; over his knees, thighs, about his hips. He ran on, clumsily, churning the water, though he could not have given a reason for his urgency. He had determined to elude the others by craft. Yet he ran with

desperate urgency and not much progress out in the center of the stream, making a noise loud enough to be clearly heard two hundred yards away, churning the water white in the darkness. He was not even aware that he had panicked until he heard, rising slowly and with a sad, peaceful quality over the woods and the spreading countryside beyond, first the voice of one hound, then another.

He ceased abruptly. He stood a moment, breathing heavily, bent forward in an attitude of listening, while all about him the water continued to move forward into the darkness. He listened to the water. Standing so, the water moving so, he had for an instant a sensation as of the entire earth—fields, houses, trees, the very primordial crust itself—poised to move forward, headlong into some empty and terrible void. But he did not hear the dogs again. Yet he knew, as surely as if someone had come and told him, that he had been outmaneuvered.

He had counted on his knowledge of how such manhunts were conducted to elude them. Apparently they, in turn, had counted on his counting. "They are waiting downstream for me," he said, quietly, aloud. So did he know they waited outside the woods, standing in quiet clumps at spaced, regular intervals about the periphery of the woods, within the shadows of trees or sitting patiently along the apron of some plowed field. He left the stream. It was not that he could not have eluded them, slipping out between two trees or along some ridge of undergrowth, since he knew the woods and the land beyond as well as they. It is that the entire countryside will be looking for me, he thought quietly, without hope. He thought how by day, now, there would be no door at which he could stop to ask for food or water, no field in which he dared lie down and rest, that did not contain within its sunny commonplace aspect the threat of sudden alarm and capture.

Twenty minutes later he was squatting beside a dirt road no wider than a single lane and which debouched suddenly from among the trees on one side and vanished after some distance, on the other. Few knew of the road; its sole use now was as a short cut through the woods. He squatted behind a screen of undergrowth and tall weeds, the silver at his feet. Overhead the constellations had shifted, wheeling across the sky and into the west, but he was no longer aware of them. He was no longer aware of time, place, the fundamental coordinates by which he marked and measured his existence.

He was not aware that he had gone to sleep. It was as if sleeping and waking were but different names for the one unbelievable nightmare which his life had now become, so that he could pass from one to the other by the mere closing of an eye and yet remain where he had always been. He slept suddenly, in squatting position, with his back against a tree and his head resting upon his arms. His clothing was still damp from the stream, and ironcold. In the sudden dank chill of just before dawn, he began to shiver. Asleep, he was still pursued, still harried from this side and that. Asleep or awake there were moments when despite all despair he imagined himself in Cracow at last, in dry clean clothing from which even the very smell of earth had been scoured, having supper in some fine expensive restaurant and with money enough to take him, and his wife and child afterward, when at length he could send for them, safely to America.

So it was not surprising that at first he believed he was dreaming that the sun had risen and it was day and a wagon was coming along the road. I am dreaming it, he told himself, as a man will in his sleep. But the warmth upon his face and arms from where the sun came through the trees persisted and grew so that at last he stirred and looked up. He had to close his

eyes immediately against the sun. It stood just above the trees, in a flat pale-colored sky empty of all clouds. "It will be a fine day today," he said quietly, into the stillness of midmorning. He caught himself at once. For a moment he had believed that this morning was like all the other mornings of his life, with nothing before it save the peaceful orderly routine by which he filled his days, passing in unbroken succession one into another. "What can I have been thinking?" he said in astonishment.

It was as though only then did everything fall into place: time and place were now fixed in his mind as unchanging and precise as lines drawn on a map, longitude in its way, latitude transverse to it. He was here, hidden in the woods, cut off from his old life as completely and immutably as though he were on another planet, though it was but an hour or two in any direction to the countryside he knew and had grown to manhood in. Even the woods were a part of his remembering, his past, so that within them yet irrevocably separate from them, he was like a ghost revisiting the scenes of its former life. That's it, he thought. I might as well be dead. But that was only an expression of the despair which sleep had engendered. But when he stood up and moved his stiffened limbs and looked across the calm sunny panorama of midmorning while birds wheeled and called across the stillness in the treetops, hope returned. Yet it was the sound of a wagon along the road more than anything else. It was closer now, carrying over the stillness; the creak of bed and axle, the even, unhurrying cllop of hooves upon hard earth.

He made no attempt to hide. He stood, waiting beside the road, the screen of bushes behind which he had slept not even chest high. Above the bushes, fixed in passive and waiting

attentiveness in the direction of the increasing noise, stared a countenance haggard, unshaven, caked with the dirt and stubble of a night's running. He saw the horse first, emerging from among the trees, around a turn, as from between the painted props of a not very professional play; head and neck first, in harness, then flank and back, then the ramshackle wagon itself with its fanfare of clatter and rattle despite its mountainlike load of full sacks and the two men who sat unmoving and quiet behind the horse, appearing not to see him and jolting each time the wagon jolted.

Yet they reined the horse immediately at a signal from him. They were not two men; one was a boy, the height of a man but with the gawky, unfleshed aspect of an adolescent. Their faces were alike; he knew they were father and son at once. They stopped almost abreast of him. Yet he had smelled the wagon sooner than that. Still he began talking at once. He scrambled hastily and clumsily from behind the bushes, talking all the while. His story had already been prepared. He had awakened with it in his mind, as though he had made it up while sleeping, as though, being interchangeable, sleeping could do waking's work. It was the measure of his desperation that he could believe the other would take at face value so implausible a story as that he was hiding there in the woods from the irate brothers of a girl he had loved and then forsaken.

The other listened in silence. He was a big man, though slack. He sat hunched upon himself, on the frail slat of wagon seat, his torso rising mountainously out of the flaccid rolls about his waist; motionless, only changing hands upon the reins. He listened attentively. Yet his expression was neither one of belief or disbelief. So that as he piled one fabrication upon another, listening to himself, his voice upon the sunny

stillness there in the clearing, Walter began to feel his talking was only something on the air, without meaning or credibility, carrying no weight or substance to the ear. He doesn't believe a word I'm saying, he thought.

Yet no sooner did he finish than the other bent forward and made a gesture with his hand, smiling suddenly with brown, gapped teeth. "I know how it is," he said in a loud, cheery voice. "I was young once too," and he winked, his face turned from the boy, smiling at Walter as though with that simple reflex of the eye he created some bond between them, conspiratorial and profound. "What can I do to help?" he said.

"Help?" Walter said in quiet surprise, after him. All along he had been hoping for such a response as this. It was the very reason he had dared signal the wagon. Yet so long had he been in flight, desperate, harassed, solitary, he had almost come to believe it would always be so; pursued forever through one dark wood or another, along icy streams, fleeing through brush and bramble, unshaven, dirty, with no voice save his own despairing cries coming on the air, filling the silence. And so the words, the offer, spoken mildly and casually on the bright morning air, came to him with a shock.

Yet he did not cease. It was as though he had developed too much momentum by now to stop for shock and surprise even. At once he stepped to the wagon, into the pale dust of the road, as through an open door; above him the other waited, watching, the boy at his side watching. Whereas before the words had rushed out of him pell mell, he now became calculating. He looked furtively up and down the road, dissembling. "Her brothers," he said, gesturing, speaking suddenly in whispers. "They're all over in the woods, and outside watching the road."

"Ah," the other said. "Of course," and he looked too, along

the empty road dwindling among the trees, at the trees themselves, as if someone might be lurking there, in the shadows, among the dark trunks, that very moment. Then he looked back. They looked at each other; the one haggard, in the soiled and irredeemable garments he had worn through the night and slept in, waiting there beside the wagon not yet hopeful but with that expectancy in his face as if he could sense again the moment when hope would return; the other with that benign expression of a tolerant uncle who has caught his young nephew smoking or playing cards for money and will not only not admonish him, but will abet him at doing it better. It was as though they could read each other's minds. "The wagon," the other said. "You would be safe among the sacks."

Then he was clambering into the wagon. Again he had that sensation as of moving in a dream, as though the wagon, the calm sunny space about him, himself beginning to clamber into the wagon, were but the figments of his vain and desperate imagining. It is too good to be true, he told himself. But beneath his hand the old smooth wood of the wagon was real enough, the wheel hub upon which he boosted himself, the sunlight on his face. Yes, he thought. There is no disputing that.

He began thanking the other before he was even in the wagon. In this, at least, he was honest. Though he dissembled everything else, even to holding the sack with that alert and unceasing craft so the silver in it should not clatter, he felt toward the other a gratitude deeper than he had ever felt before in his life. The other quieted him with a motion of his hand. "That's all right," he said in a clear hearty voice. "My pleasure. I am always glad to do a favor." And when Walter mounted over the side he offered him his hand, steadying him as he stepped down among the sacks. He stepped gingerly, like a

bather entering cold water, setting his mind against the smell which, having had time to emanate and spread, now lay over the clearing like smoke. Well, beggars can't be choosers, he thought.

"It's not the nicest place in the world to lay down," the other said, as though reading his mind.

"It's all right," he said. "It will be fine."

Yet still he could not advance among the sacks. This time it was not his doing, his distaste. He is holding my hand, he thought in surprise. He turned. The other was turned toward him; straddling the seat, one hand clasping his, just as he had left him when he stepped down into the wagon bed, even to the expression of open and hearty amiability. He had begun to sweat in the increasing sun, his shirt blotched now where it lay against his flesh. "Your bundle," he said. "I can keep it up here for you."

"That's all right, I can manage," Walter said. He had begun to think the other hadn't even noticed the sack. He was not alarmed. He is just being helpful, he thought.

"I could put it under the seat where it would be out of your way," the other said.

"Thank you, but I would rather have it with me," Walter said. "Besides, her brothers might recognize it."

"Of course. Her brothers," the other said.

But when Walter tried to draw his hand free the other bent suddenly toward him and spoke in a flat, cold, level voice entirely unlike his voice before. "All right," he said. "That's enough of playing games. Just let me have the sack. I don't want to have to break your arm, too." But it was not until the other spoke to the boy—a single phrase, not even peremptory, abrupt; simply loud—who turned and came down from the seat

as at a command, toward him, to take the silver, that Walter realized the full import of the other's intent; so utter had been his astonishment. So astonished, so stunned, by the other's sudden transformation in tone and manner and intent, he could only stand there, immobile, gaping, while from the treetops above there broke upon the clearing the abrupt, shrill sounds of birds quarreling; thinking: It's a game. He is playing some kind of game. That's what it is, must be. Then he thought: It's not a game. He means every word. And he began to struggle.

He had the advantage. He was apparently more agile. And the other was seated, half straddled on the slat of wagon seat. Perhaps it was simply that the night's events had exhausted him more than he knew. Perhaps it was that his will, the sheer single-purposedness of his every action and thought, had flagged for an instant, as it had earlier, that time shortly after he had fled the Burgomaster's house. Because the other managed, without too much effort, using his vast bulk as a fulcrum, to immobilize Walter within a space of twenty seconds, twisting up his arm and pinning it behind his back. Above them, in the trees, the birds had ceased; they could hear distinctly the click and buzz of insects in the sudden silence. It was as though they had paused to listen: Walter on his knees among the sacks of manure, panting, his eyes wild, glancing this way and that; the other at his back, panting too, looking down out of a countenance scornful and cold and as different from his earlier expression as night from day. Looking down too, standing with one foot on the seat and one in the wagon bed, his expression the pair to his father's, was the boy, holding a pitchfork he had produced suddenly, as out of the air itself.

While he watched in utter helplessness the boy came and took the silver from among the other sacks, where he had finally

dropped it. Watching the boy, the sack which contained the silver, he experienced a fall and cessation of his blood such as he believed came with death. Why not? he said quietly, to himself. I might as well be dead. Yet when the other bent across his shoulder and spoke in his ear, he felt a wild and desperate rage. "What kind of a fool do you think I am?" the other said, his voice contemptuous, harsh, setting up a ringing in his ears. "All that nonsense about a girl, and brothers out for revenge. It would not fool a child." He said, "The whole countryside is looking for you, did you know that? They are out for your blood. They are going to kill you when they catch up with you. Did you know *that*?" Then he said, "Look in the sack."

His face was gone from Walter's ear; the warm and cool of his breathing was gone. Then Walter could hear the thin clear ringing of silver upon silver as the boy emptied the sack on the wagon seat. "Ahh," the other said, softly. "Ahh." Then he was back again, his breathing on Walter's ear again. "I will make you a proposition," he said. His voice was exuberant; almost light, almost joyful. "Your life for the silver. How is that? I will get you out of the province and for that I keep the silver. Well?" Then he laughed. It was when he began to laugh that Walter, in a sudden fury born of frustration and despair and self pity, began to shout, his voice ringing over the clearing, yet with a thin, trivial quality, ephemeral, come and swiftly gone on the air, the sunlight, with no echo, no trace left behind. "All right," he shouted. "Kill me already. What are you waiting for? Do it and get it over with."

In contrast the other's tone was one of mild and inveterate reasonableness; almost surprised. "Kill you?" he said. "I'm no murderer." He said, "I don't have to kill you. You're not going to tell the authorities about me. You are not going to tell any-

one anything, because they are looking for you. They wouldn't let you say five words." There was no hint in his tone, his voice; beyond Walter's shoulder his face remained mild, faintly mocking, sweating a little. So when he made a small, quick, upward motion with the hand at Walter's back, deftly and effectively breaking his arm, Walter had no warning at all. He did not even cry out. He felt only a single hard jolt, as from a blow, at his shoulder, then his entire right side went numb. "That's in case you get any ideas about trying to get the silver back," the other said.

Though he lay upon the hard planking of the wagon bed, the wagon lurching and jolting beneath him upon the hard and rutted earth, the sacks of manure heaped on top of him, he felt no sensation at all in his arm and shoulder for a long time after. He lay in the position in which he had fallen, tumbled hugger mugger by them, as into a grave, into a space they had cleared among the sacks. Then they had piled the sacks over him, leaving a small opening for breathing, where his face was. He could see through the opening: hexagonal bits of sky, clouds, the distant edges of trees. It must be like this in a coffin, he thought. But the odor about him was not that of earth. In his nostrils even the rough planking beneath his head gave off the rich, ineradicable smell of manure, ranker than that of earth. I would be better off in a coffin, he told himself. He seemed to see himself as in a coffin; tumbled to one side, unshaven, dirty, in the rent and soiled garments he had been out of but two hours in the past twenty-four. "Dear God," he said, aloud, into the sacks. "Dear God in Heaven." So great was his self-pity at that moment, tears came into his eyes.

At length he calmed. He lay watching the sky, the slow intermittent procession of overhanging leaf and bough. He did not

know how long he lay so, nor how far they had come. Maybe we are out of the province, he thought. The possibility no sooner occurred to him than he thought again of the other's duplicity and his own unwariness, and he began again to curse the entire mischance of events which had led to this moment. All I wanted was to get enough money for a boat ticket, he thought. He had always been an honest man. It was because his sense of justice had been outraged by the inequities he saw all about him that he determined to go to America in the first place. Now he lay brooding upon the enormity of his deprivation, thinking of the night's events and all that he had dared and endured for the silver only to lose it in a single moment's remissness. "He will not get away with it," he said, aloud, bitterly. Still he knew he was no match for the other. The wagon did not cease. It went on, now smooth, now lurching and pitching so that firmament and frond succeeded each other in the winking of an eye. With his good hand he could touch the spoon handle in his jacket-pocket, filed down at one end. He touched the handle, the filed edge, sharp as a blade. Touching the handle, there came to him what he must do if he were to redeem any part of what it had cost him to obtain the silver; and he spoke it.

"There is nothing else," he said quietly. "I will have to kill him."

